

A Nadder's Mystery

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Summary: The canon cast's younger siblings get a LOT more than they bargained for when they rescue a lost baby dragon from a cave. OC's. Rated K-plus for mild violence; the language is all K. This story is set in my "Lightning and Death Itself" timeline.

1. Chapter 1

**A Nadder's Mystery **Chapter 1

A/N In chapter 8 of "How to Be a Pirate" (book 2 in the HTTYD series by Cressida Cowell), a baby Deadly Nadder gets separated from its mother in a cave and dies a horrible death. I really hate that part, so I'm rewriting the baby Nadder's story and giving it a better destiny. OC's. Rated K-plus for mild violence; the language is all K._

This story is set in my own "Lightning and Death Itself" timeline, shortly after ending #1, but it isn't technically a sequel. It's not mandatory to read that story in order to enjoy this one, but a lot of the details won't make sense if you don't read the other story first._

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"Didn't I tell you guys this would be awesome?"

"Yeah," Varinn answered, not even trying to hide his lack of enthusiasm. "Really awesome."

The four pre-teens were making their way through a dark, damp, cobweb-infested cave in search of something interesting. They had no idea what that "something" might be, or if they would be able to find it, or if it even existed. But Spamlout had dared them to go on this expedition with her, and none of them was willing to back down in front of the others.

Spamlout led the way, as she usually did. She lived in her big brother Snotlout's shadow, and never missed a chance to try to prove herself worthy of her family name. She carried a torch in one hand and her single-bladed axe in the other. Unlike many other Vikings, she never threw her axe, but kept it close for hand-to-hand mayhem. Nothing less would ever impress her father, which was something she desperately wanted to do, but never succeeded at. She looked a lot like her brother, including the muscles, but she was a girl, and her father had no regard for girls at all. He wouldn't even provide her with a proper warrior's garb; her hard-leather armor outfit was cobbled together from whatever bits and pieces she could find.

Varinn walked just behind her, carrying his usual spear set. His big sister Astrid had impressed him with the value of being able to use the same weapon for both long-range and close-up combat, but he hadn't wanted to be exactly like her, so he learned to use the spear instead of the axe. He carried one with a thick handle for melees, and a thinner one for throwing. He'd figured out how to groove the thick one's handle so the thin one would partially nestle into it, so he could carry both with one hand. He kept his other hand free, just in case. As the group's unofficial leader, he liked to stay close to the front so he could see what was happening, but not in the very front, so he could have a few seconds to think when a new situation arose. His unusual mix of caution and Viking aggression had kept them out of serious trouble more than once.

Just behind him came Hensteeth, or Henny as his friends called him. He was the total opposite of his older brother. Where Fishlegs was big and brainy and didn't flaunt his strength, Henny was short and wiry and tended to conceal the workings of his clever mind. He wasn't as good with his weapons as the others, but he had few equals in running, jumping, or climbing cliffs. His chosen weapon was an adult-sized seax, a single-edged knife that he wielded like a short sword. He kept it in its sheath today, and used one hand to keep his backpack from sliding off his shoulder. He was the only one who had thought to bring rope, extra torches, or anything else that might be useful to explore a cave. He hoped this expedition would last a while. His mother was into the mead again, and that meant nothing good for anyone else in his house; he planned to stay away from home for as long as he could.

Bringing up the rear, as usual, was Fluffernut. She was far from the most adventurous member of the group, and she wasn't keen on their surroundings. A quiet child, she would have preferred to stay home and practice sewing or cooking, but the other members of her household never let that happen. She had been quite young when both her parents were killed by raiders on another island, and she was sent to live with distant relatives, including Ruffnut and Tuffnut. She was almost as smart as both of the twins put together, and quite a bit prettier than Ruff, so they tormented her without mercy. She much preferred the company of her friends; they might not have much in common with her, but at least they let her be herself. She carried another torch, and kept her bow and arrows slung on her back.

The four of them did nearly everything together. If one of them got in trouble, the other three would certainly be involved somehow; if one got in a fight, the other three would find a way to join in; and if one received something special, the other three would invent a way to share it with him or her. Varinn's mother had dubbed them the

Terrible Terrors a few years ago, because they were small and fancied themselves to be dangerous, and they had proudly adopted the name for their group. They were bonded together by their common age and their willingness to abide by four basic rules: you don't tease Spamlout about her father, you don't tease Henny about his mother, you don't tease Fluffernut about either of her parents, and you definitely don't tease Varinn about Astrid.

The other three were enduring situations that weren't uncommon among the Vikings, or any other culture; they could relate to each other and comfort each other to some extent. They had all disappointed their parents in some way, they had all seen the effects of ale and mead on adults, and they had all lost relatives to violent causes. But how do you comfort someone whose sister has been turned into a Night Fury? It's kind of hard for most people to relate to a situation like that. His whole family was still struggling with it; his mother kept Astrid's room unused and untouched except for dusting, as though she might come back and live there again some day. No one was ever sure how Varinn would react to jokes about "the dragon lady" or similar comments. One day, the response might be sullen silence; the next day, he might storm away in a huff; the day after that, he might try to blacken your eye. It was best not to say anything.

"Spamlout, remind me again what we're looking for?" Henny called.

"This is a cave, you nimrod!" she called over her shoulder, as though that explained everything. "We might be the first people who ever found this place! Look for anything that's cool."

"All we've seen so far is owl pellets and bat droppings," Fluffernut complained.

"If you think a place where flying things go to the bathroom is cool, I'd say you hit the jackpot," Henny added.

"Shh!" Varinn hissed suddenly. "Everybody, be quiet!" They all froze in place. In the sudden silence, they could hear every rustle of their clothing, every creak of their boots; even their breathing sounded unnaturally loud.

Then he heard it again, very soft and distant.

"I heard it, too," Fluffernut whispered. "It sounded like a Terrible Terror, a long way off."

They were standing near a fork in the cave. The right branch seemed to stay level, while the left fork began to descend. "I think it came from the left," Henny said quietly.

"It came from the right," Spamlout hissed back.

"I can't tell," Fluffernut said softly. They all looked at Varinn.

"Left," he decided. They turned left. Among the Terrors, the majority ruled. It had always been that way; that was how they did things.

They went extra-quietly now, hoping to hear the sound again, preferably before its source jumped out at them and scared them half to death. Of course, they had no idea whether a Terrible Terror would do a thing like that, but in the dark stillness of the cave, their imaginations were beginning to run away with them. They closed ranks and pressed on.

The walls of this part of the cave glistened with moisture. They walked carefully, not wanting to slip if it meant landing in slime or something equally gross. Varinn was wondering if it might be a good idea to use Henny's rope to tie themselves together when they came to a five-way junction of cave passages. Aside from the path they were on, two caves led off to the left, one went right and slightly up before becoming a dead end, and the fifth went almost straight down.

Again the group stopped and listened in the dark. After a few seconds, they heard the distant call again. There was no question, it came from below them.

"Spamlout, you've got a torch. How deep is that hole?"

The girl leaned over the edge cautiously. "I'm not sure if I'm looking at the bottom, or just a ledge part-way down, but it looks like about forty feet."

"I've got a hundred feet of rope," Henny suggested. "Should we tie ourselves together and climb down?"

"No," Varinn decided. "The first thing we should do is decide if it's worth risking our lives just to see a Terrible Terror. There are dozens of them all over Berk, and we don't have to climb down into dark, slimy holes in the ground to see most of them."

"You do make it sound like a bad idea," Fluffernut nodded.

"Terrible Terrors always live in flocks," Spamlout argued. "They probably live down here! We might be just a few feet away from their nest! Wouldn't it be cool to see a whole nest of them?"

"We only heard one, not a nest full of them," Varinn observed.

"I'd like to try it, just for the fun of climbing," Henny chimed in. His real motive was to keep the expedition going, so he didn't have to go home.

"Two in favor, two against," Varinn noted. "Shall I flip the coin?" They all nodded. He pulled out the copper piece that was too worn out for the adults to use for currency any more. Henny had carved a "Yes" rune on one side and a "No" on the other with his seax. Flipping it was their usual way of breaking deadlocks and making decisions. They used it a lot.

"Do we go down?" he asked out loud, and flipped the coin. He caught it in the air, slapped it against his wrist, and looked at it in the flickering torchlight. "Yes," he said, somewhat reluctantly. "Fluff, you tie Henny's rope to something solid. Henny, you'll go down first." He knew Fluffernut could tie the best knots, and there was no question that Henny was their number-one explorer. In about five minutes, Hensteeth was making his way down into the darkness with

Spamlout's torch in his teeth.

"There are lots of handholds and little ledges," he called when he reached the bottom. "We can all get down and back up again easily. The bottom is about forty feet down, and it's damp but solid."

"Let me go next," Spamlout urged him, and he nodded. As she descended, he turned to Fluffernut. "I know you're not happy with all this exploring in the dark. Would you rather go down with us, or stay up here and keep an eye on this end of the rope?"

She twirled her blonde ponytail with a finger, which meant she was thinking hard. "I'll go with the rest of you," she decided. "I don't like the looks of that hole, but being up here all by myself would be even worse."

"Okay, then you go next. I'll make sure the rope is still tied tightly, and then I'll come down and join you." She descended with the ease that comes from long practice. Even though she wasn't an adventurer at heart, she'd tagged along on so many adventures with the others that she'd acquired many useful skills from them. Once she was at the bottom, he took the other torch in his teeth and climbed down to the floor of the cave below.

He'd just reached the bottom when Henny sneezed loudly. Spamlout gave him a dirty look, but it was way too late to tell him to keep it quiet. They listened as the echoes of the sneeze died away. Complete silence had not quite returned when they heard the little dragon call again, and again.

"I think it's getting closer," Fluffernut said, a bit nervously.

Spamlout brandished her axe. "If that thing makes one unfriendly move, POW!"

Varinn rested his hand on her shoulder. "Did you forget, we aren't at war with the dragons any more?"

"You always spoil my fun," Spamlout complained. "Didn't you ever want to be a real Viking when you grew up?"

His face darkened slightly. "Let's just say I've got a family member who wouldn't like it if we beat up a dragon." She bit down on her reply, and they waited in silence.

After a few seconds, Fluffernut and Spamlout both exclaimed, "I see something!" A moment later, the boys saw it too.

As it toddled toward them, they could plainly see that it was no Terrible Terror. The size was right, but it walked on two legs instead of four, and the head was the wrong shape. It seemed to be blue in color, with reddish markings on its wings, although it was hard to tell one color from another by torchlight. Not only that, but the dragon was covered in dirt. It stopped about ten feet away from them, squeaked, and waited.

"I think it's a Deadly Nadder," Henny decided. "Two legs, one horn, and it looks like it has spines on its tail. My brother would know for sure."

"The last time I looked, Deadly Nadders were a lot taller than the ceiling of this cave," Spamlout said dismissively.

"Then it must be a baby," said Henny.

"If it's a baby, then there must be a mother around somewhere," Varinn quavered. "One thing we do not want to do is come between a mother dragon and her baby! I say we leave it alone."

"Spamlout is right," Henny argued. "A grown Deadly Nadder wouldn't fit in this cave. If this baby has a mother, that mother is nowhere near here. Maybe it's lost."

"I never heard of a dragon getting lost before." That was Spamlout, looking for someone to argue with, as usual. Even though Hensteeth had taken her side a moment ago, she couldn't resist the temptation to disagree with him.

"Baby dragons probably don't have the same common sense that adults do," Henny argued. "They're babies! They could get separated from their parents, and hide in a cave because it makes them feel safe, and wander off and get lost, just like a child could. Right, Varinn?"

"I suppose," Varinn shrugged. "I'm not an expert on dragons. What do you think, Fluff?" She didn't answer. "Fluff?"

While the other three were arguing, Fluffernut had slowly edged out to the limit of their flickering circle of torchlight and sat down. The little dragon had cautiously wandered over to her, sniffing the air and cocking its head. She had reached out and scratched under its chin, at which point the dragonet had trilled in delight and climbed into her lap. She looked toward her friends with a huge smile on her face. "I think he's adorable, I think he's lost, and I think we need to get him out of this cave and back to the other dragons so he can find his mother. That's what I think."

"Adorable? That's pushing it, Fluff," Henny said. "As for getting him out of here, why can't he fly out himself?"

"For one thing, if he's really lost, he might not know which way he should go," Varinn cut in. "For another thing, the way out is almost straight up, and a baby dragon might not be a strong enough flier to do that, especially if he can't see where he's going."

"He could light the way with his own fire," Spamlout objected.

"Dragons have a shot limit," Varinn retorted. "If he's been down here in the dark for any length of time, he's probably all out of fire. I'm starting to agree with Fluffernut — we ought to take him out with us, and see if any of the dragons in town has lost a baby."

"If his mother gets mad at you, I'm not going to help you," Spamlout protested.

"If his mother gets mad at us, I'd be surprised," Henny said. "Usually, when a child gets lost, the parents get mad at the kid and thank the rescuer."

"That's how it works with people," Spamlout disagreed. "Dragons aren't people. Just in case you forgot."

"I think we all knew that," Varinn said tightly. "The real question is, how are we going to get him out? We'll need both hands to climb that rope, so how are we going to hang onto the dragon?"

"Hmmm," the other three all said at once.

"I've got it," said Varinn. "Fluff, do you think you can talk your little friend into riding on top of Henny's backpack?"

"I'll try," she said uncertainly. "I don't think he speaks our language." She tried to stand up; the little dragon squawked and flapped its wings in protest. "I don't think he wants to leave me."

"Okay, we'll try a Plan B," Varinn thought out loud. "Fluff, what if you wore Henny's pack, so the dragon could ride with you?"

"It's okay with me," said Hensteeth as he shrugged out of the backpack. Varinn took it and began to walk toward Fluffernut. The dragon in her lap bared its teeth and hissed at him; its tiny tail spines bristled.

"Maybe you should get down on your hands and knees, so you don't look so big and scary to him," Fluff suggested.

"Him? Big and scary? That's a first!" Spamlout snorted. Varinn ignored her and got down into a crouch.

"Hey, little guy," he said softly. "We want to help you get out of here, but you have to work with us. For starters, can you and I be friends?" He slowly extended one hand to the little dragon. It sniffed him and looked at him curiously. He scratched under its chin like Fluff had done. It half-closed its eyes and trilled at him. He couldn't help smiling.

"Hey, can I try that?" Henny asked eagerly.

"Sure, once we're out of this cave," Varinn said, keeping his voice down so he didn't spook the dragon. He slowly crept behind Fluff and helped her get her arms into the backpack's straps. She tried to explain, with words and hand gestures, what they wanted the baby dragon to do. After explaining it a few times, the Nadder climbed up her vest, across her shoulder, and onto the backpack. She stood slowly; the dragon flapped its wings for balance, but stayed where it was.

"Okay, that went a lot more smoothly than I expected," Varinn said. "Spamlout, you take a torch and go up first. Fluff, you go second; I'll be right behind you. Henny, you bring up the rear with the other torch. Okay, Terrors, let's move out!" The ascent to the cave's main level went uneventfully.

Once they were out of the pit, the dragon jumped off the backpack and glided to the ground. It looked up at them, blinking.

"He really doesn't know which way to go," Fluffernut observed, as

Hensteeth reclaimed his rope and stowed it in his pack.

"Let's start walking and see if he follows us," Henny suggested. They got moving, and the baby Nadder toddled alongside them, staying near Varinn when it wasn't keeping close to Fluff.

"Hey, Fluff, what's your family going to say when you come home with a baby dragon in tow?" Spamlout wondered.

Fluff made an unhappy face. "I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I don't want that kind of attention at home. Could one of you take him instead?"

"Good luck with that," Spamlout replied. "You're the one he's following around, mostly. Congratulations! You just became a mommy dragon. I think he's got your eyes." She snickered at her own joke.

"Very funny," Varinn cut her off. "We'll think about that on the way home." He hadn't thought of anything by the time they reached the mouth of the cave.

No one ever knew it, but Hensteeth's sneeze was the luckiest thing that ever happened to that little Nadder. Had it not heard the noise and turned back to investigate, but kept following the cave passage it had wandered into, it would soon have encountered something very large and unpleasant, and that encounter would have marked the end of one very small dragon.

2. Chapter 2

**A Nadder's Mystery **Chapter 2

The cave entrance was set into the stone wall that marked the limits of one of Berk's few beaches. It was a rocky beach, not a sandy beach, and it was regularly pounded by cold waves sweeping in from the North Sea. The four adventurers and their tiny new friend stepped out of the cave, around the boulders that mostly hid the entrance from view, and onto the shingle, and paused for a few moments as they adjusted from the darkness of the cave to the dim northern daylight, and from the cave's still air to the biting northern winds.

The baby dragon was the first to move. It squeaked in what sounded like delight, and ran straight toward the shore. It almost plunged into the water, but the sight of an approaching wave frightened it, and it ran back to dry ground. It repeated this performance several times — rushing toward the water, then running away again.

"What is that crazy little thing doing?" Varinn demanded of Henny.

"Darned if I know," the other boy shrugged. "My brother would know; I wish he was here."

"Oh, for Thor's sake, don't you people know anything about dragons?" Spamlout snapped. "'The Deadly Nadder is well-known for its vanity; it constantly grooms itself to stay clean and maintain the luster of its scales.' This one is filthy from being in the cave, so he wants to wash himself. But the waves are bigger than he is. He

can't make up his mind which is worse, being dirty or being drowned."

"Where did you learn so much about dragons?" Hensteeth exclaimed.

" 'If you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles', " she said smugly. "I read that in a book."

"A book!?" Henny was amazed. "I didn't think your family read words! I thought you just killed the stuff the words tell you stuff about."

"Our tribe has all the mindless muscle-bound morons it can use," she said dismissively. "I want to be a real Viking and still think now and then. Speaking of thinking, what do you think we should do with our grubby little companion?"

"If we could clean him up without making him face the waves, he'd probably like that." That was Fluffernut, thinking out loud. "But we'd need a wash basin, and I don't see any of those around here."

Varinn considered the matter. "We could just take him back to town the way he is, and let his mother clean him up."

"I'm not sure you could make him walk away from the water," Fluff replied. "He really wants to get clean." They watched him wade ankle-deep in the sea, then run back to dry land in a squealing panic, pursued by a large, foaming breaker.

"I suppose we ought to help the little guy, but how?" Varinn wondered.

They ultimately did it the hard way, wetting their handkerchiefs and other rags in the sea and scrubbing him by hand. It took much longer than it should have taken to clean up such a small dragon. Every time they thought they were finished, the little Nadder would look behind a wing, or under its tail, and find a spot they'd missed. It took them almost an hour.

"I think the little lizard is making it hard for us on purpose!" Spamlout complained. She'd managed to do the least amount of work of the four, but her hands still ached and she'd still gotten soaked.

"I think we should call him Scrubby," Fluff decided.

"How come you get to name him?" Henny demanded.

"Maybe because she did the most work cleaning him up," Varinn answered for her. There was no arguing with that. At last, the baby dragon passed its own inspection, looked up at them, and chirped.

"I guess that means we're ready to go back to town," Varinn said. "We have a little time before supper to try and find this guy's mother for him." They filed up the path that led from the beach to the lower sheep pastures, and from there into the actual village of Berk, with the little Nadder strutting along beside them. They quickly found that they had to go slow so he could keep up with them.

"Where should we go?" Henny asked.

"Let's go to the Dragon Training Academy first," Varinn decided. "They can tell us for sure if it's a Nadder or not, and they'll probably know exactly what we should do."

"Can't we make our own decisions?" Spamlout fussed.

"We can make our own decisions about ourselves," Varinn answered, "but this little guy is some mommy dragon's baby, and we need to get them back together as soon as we can. That's why I want to hear from the experts, like Henny's brother."

They were in luck; Fishlegs was in the stone arena with his Gronckle. They were practicing precision flying together, hovering right up against the bars and chains that roofed the Academy, but they landed quickly when they saw the Terrors enter the ring. Meatlug gave the baby dragon a curious sniff, but didn't pay it much attention after that.

Fishlegs, on the other hand, had a curiosity attack. "Hey, Henny! Varinn, Spamlout, Fluffernut! What's with the baby Nadder? Where did you find him? How come he's following you? Where's his mother?"

"We found him in a cave we were exploring," Hensteeth explained. "We think he's lost; he was covered in dirt, and he acted really happy to see us. We want to find his mother and get them back together."

"That sounds smart," Fishlegs nodded. "Mothers can get really protective of their children. Well, most of them are." The two brothers exchanged a rueful glance. "Anyway, there are a lot of Nadders all over Berk now. It might be hard to find the right one. It would be best if you went to visit one of the Night Furies. They know everything about our dragons. If one of them has lost a baby, that would be the fastest way to get them back together."

"I suppose you're right," Varinn sighed. The Night Furies would definitely be their best resource for reuniting a lost dragon-child with his mother. But he dreaded having to meet with his sister. There wasn't much question in his mind that it was really her inside the black scaly exterior, but their meetings were always so... awkward. Maybe they'd be lucky and get to deal with Hiccup, or New-night-fury as he now called himself, instead.

As it turned out, it didn't matter. They were halfway between the Academy and the Nest, as the humans called the Night Furies' house, when Scrubby squawked three times and ran toward a big blue Nadder he'd just seen. That dragon also squawked, much more loudly, and raced to meet the little one. They rubbed noses; the big one almost bowled her child over with enthusiasm.

Spamlout shrugged. "Well, I guess that's the end of that adventure."

"Maybe not," Henny noted. The baby dragon was running back toward them. Varinn crouched, and Fluff got down on one knee, to greet him when he got close enough to â€"

WHAM! A thick blue tail slammed to the ground between them. The mother dragon didn't hit her child, or any of the human children, but she didn't miss by much. Her message was painfully clear. The four young people backed away, showing the big dragon their open hands.

"Sorry, uhh, ma'am," Varinn stammered. "I guess we're done here." The big dragon shook her head, rattled her neck spines, and leaned down to glare at him with her left eye. He almost broke and ran, but he felt his friends' eyes on him, and felt like he ought to act like a leader or something.

"We tried to take good care of your little one," he quavered. "He's a lot cleaner than when we found him. We never wanted to keep him or anything; we just wanted to help him find you, and I guess we did that. We'll go now." He backed away a step, turned, and walked away toward the Mead Hall. The other Terrible Terrors joined him. They didn't walk quite as fast as they normally would have, even though it was supper time and they were quite hungry.

"It's not like we were going to keep him or anything," Henny said to no one.

"What would we do with a baby dragon anyway?" Varinn asked.

"Just keeping him clean would be way too much work," Spamlout added.

"He's better off with his mother," Fluffernut decided, and blinked hard once or twice.

They ate together, mostly in silence. The only significant comment was when Hensteeth said to Spamlout, "I admit it -- you were right about one thing. We did find something cool in that cave." They went home with their respective families for the night, wondering what new adventures tomorrow would bring.

Varinn got his answer very early the next morning. His mother shook him awake. "Varinn, do you have any idea why there's a baby dragon scratching at our front door?"

"Oh, no!!" Varinn exclaimed as he leaped out of bed. "If his mother finds him here, we're toast!"

"The dragon's mother?" Edda Hofferson was confused. "Why would a dragon be upset to find her baby at our house? We take pretty good care of the dragons that visit us, don't we?"

"Mom, you don't know the whole story!" He was slipping into his boots as quickly as he could. "We rescued him from a cave yesterday, and... I don't know what his mother thinks of us -- I don't think like a dragon -- but she seemed mad at us, like she thought we were stealing her baby or something. I tried to tell her we were just trying to get them back together, but I don't think she got the message. If she finds her baby here, she's liable to think --"

An ear-splitting, high-pitched roar drowned out whatever he was about to say.

3. Chapter 3

A Nadder's Mystery Chapter 3

Varinn heard the dragon's roar rattle the pots and cups in the kitchen, and all the life drained out of him. "Game over," he said softly.

His mother rested a hand on his shoulder. "I've never heard of dragons making trouble for people since the war ended, and there isn't going to be any trouble here. Not if I have anything to say about it!"

"Mom, I'm not sure how much good you can do. We're dealing with an angry, protective mother here!"

"So is she!" Edda snapped. "Or did you think dragons are the only mothers who want to look out for their children?" She stepped around Varinn and flung the front door open.

Standing right in front of the door was a tiny blue Nadder. Nadders were far from cute, in most people's estimation, but this one was so little and so eager-looking, Edda's heart went out to it. Towering over it stood an adult Nadder, also blue, and not nearly so cute. It bent down to look closely at Edda, who planted her hands on her hips and glared back at it. The dragon actually gave way, backing off half a step. Then it saw Varinn inside the house. It growled, but it wasn't a growl of immediate threat.

"What do you want with my son?" Edda demanded. The two mothers stared at each other for a moment. They could not understand each other, yet Edda wondered if they were standing on the edge of common ground, if only they could communicate somehow. Her younger son, Rangi, roused from bed by all the noise, was just staring at the scene before him. Did this mother Nadder have other children, too? Then the little dragon dashed through the doorway, around Edda's ankles, and into the house where Varinn stood.

"Hey, Scrubby!" He stooped eagerly to scratch under the Nadder's chin; the little dragon trilled with delight. The mother dragon snarled and started to charge, then stopped. She realized she couldn't fit through the door, and while she might stick her head in, she would have to butt the boy's mother aside to do it. Edda stood her ground, albeit a bit nervously. The other mother was far larger and somewhat angrier, but Edda was guarding her own house as well as her own son. The dragon hesitated, then threw her head back and let out an ear-splitting roar that must have been audible all over town. Within moments, other Nadders began running or flapping over to the Hofferson home; it was quickly surrounded.

"Varinn, this is getting out of control," his mother said nervously. "I think the little dragon needs to get out of the house before somebody gets hurt."

"Yeah," he agreed, shocked at the dragons' reaction. "Scrubby, you need to go to your mother." He gestured toward the open door. "Go on! She's calling you." The tiny dragon took a few steps toward the door, then turned back to look at Varinn.

"Does he want me to go with him?" the boy asked.

"It looks that way, but I don't think you should go out there," his mother said. "Not with eleven angry dragons standing around."

"Twelve," Varinn said glumly as another one arrived.

"That one isn't angry," Edda said with a bit of surprise. "That's Astrid!"

The Nadders made way for the Night Fury to approach the house. She let out a quick growl; the mother Nadder replied with some snarls and grunts, and the two of them had a quick discussion that sounded terrifying. Then the black dragon gestured sharply with her head, and the other dragons made room for her to scratch some runes in the dirt with her claw.

VARINN, DID YOU STEAL
>THIS DRAGON'S BABY?<p>

"No!" he exclaimed. "We rescued him out of a cave! He was lost! He came here this morning on his own! I think he likes me!"

"I don't know about the cave part," Edda added, "but it's true that the little one came here this morning all by himself, and he does seem to like your brother."

Astrid-the-dragon thought for a few seconds, then wrote some more.

I BELIEVE YOU, BUT AN
>ANGRY MOTHER IS HARD
TO PACIFY. WILL YOU COME
>TO THE NEST SO WE CAN
SETTLE THIS?

Varinn didn't want to admit it, but he was starting to feel afraid. He didn't want to start any fights with dragons â€“ they were big and scary, but also kind of cool â€“ but it looked as though he'd done so anyway. Did he dare entrust himself to them? His sister would certainly look out for him... but she was a dragon, too. Whose side was she on?

His mother seemed to sense his unease. "Astrid, could we let Stoick judge this matter? My son is a human; he shouldn't be judged by dragons."

THIS IS A DRAGON MATTER.
>YOU KNOW I'LL BE FAIR.
I'M A NIGHT FURY.

"We know you'll be fair to dragons!" Varinn shot back. "There's twelve of you, and only one of me! How can that be fair?"

The Night Fury actually looked hurt.

I'M IMPARTIAL TO ALL.
>BESIDES, YOU'RE MY BROTHER.
I'LL PROTECT YOU JUST
>LIKE I ALWAYS DID.<p>

The impossible contradictions of the situation hit Varinn between the eyes. His house was surrounded by angry dragons, one of which was convinced he meant some kind of harm to her baby, even though he'd shown it nothing but kindness. The most fearsome dragon of all was

offering to mediate the situation. That dragon used to be his sister, who had guarded him against bullies when he was little. No, she still was his sister, except she wasn't, even though she was, but... He hid his face in his hands and shook his head; his shoulders were trembling. Even the adults had trouble sorting this insane situation out! He was still just a kid!

Then he heard the most welcome voice in the world. "What's going on here?" His father had heard the commotion and left his butcher shop to find out why all those dragons were gathering at his house.

A quick snarl from Astrid, and the dragons parted to let him through. Both his wife and his son hugged him desperately as soon as he got through the door. "Okay, I'll ask again â€“ what's going on?"

Edda quickly summarized the morning's events; Varinn and Astrid-the-dragon nodded in agreement. Gunnarr thought for a second.

"This does sound like a dragon matter. But handing a very young man over to dragon justice doesn't sound like a good idea, even if he wasn't my own son. Astrid, would you object if I stand by Varinn's side during this trial, or hearing, or whatever you call it?"

NO OBJECTION.

>HE'S NOT ON TRIAL.
I JUST WANT TO FIND OUT
>WHAT'S GOING ON.<p>

Gunnarr nodded. "Son, let's go. You and me. It's going to be fine. And, while we're walking, how about you tell me the whole story?" Varinn did so, with all the details. For the first time in years, he wasn't embarrassed to be seen walking hand-in-hand with his father. The Night Fury walked beside them, and the Nadders followed. The only sound they made was their heavy footfalls. Varinn felt like he was marching to the scaffold.

When they reached the Nest, they found it surrounded by dragons of all kinds, all standing and waiting in silence. "Son, that's a lot of dragons to be involved with just one baby. Are you sure you've told me everything?"

"Yes, Dad, honest! You can ask my friends â€“ they'll tell you the same thing!"

Astrid flapped heavily up to the second level of the wall-less building, where Hiccup, Toothless, and Guana waited. She gestured with her head for the two humans to join her there. They climbed the stairway that had been installed for that purpose, and looked out at the huge reptiles that now surrounded them.

Two houses away, the other three members of the Terrible Terrors were sticking their heads out a second-floor window in Spitelout's house. They were just close enough to hear Varinn and Gunnarr when they addressed the dragons, but they couldn't hear the private exchanges between father and son.

"Do you think he's going to get in trouble with the dragons?" Spamlout wondered.

Hensteeth thought for a second. "If they care about the truth, he

ought to be okay. If all they want is revenge for something..." He didn't finish.

"We did the whole thing together," Fluff said to no one in particular. "If he does get in trouble with the dragons, that means we're next." Henny and Spamlout both gulped.

Hiccup-the-dragon stepped over to the sand table and wrote quickly:

NIGHT-FURY-MOTHER-OF-TWINS WILL
>RUN THIS MEETING. I'LL WRITE SO YOU
CAN UNDERSTAND THE DRAGONS.

>GUANA IS LEARNING WHAT NIGHT FURIES DO.
TOOTHLESS IS HERE FOR CROWD CONTROL.

"Do you need crowd control?" Gunnarr asked. "That sounds ominous."

A LOT OF THESE DRAGONS ARE
>KIND OF WORKED UP. YOU'LL
KNOW WHY IN A MINUTE.

Astrid roared, and the few dragons that were talking to each other fell silent. She made a short dragon monologue, which Hiccup translated as fast as he could.

OVER THE PAST MONTH, SEVEN DRAGON
>BABIES HAVE DISAPPEARED. THIS IS
VERY UNUSUAL. NADDER-BLUE-FLIES-
>IN-THE-STORM IS THE ONLY ONE TO GET
HER BABY BACK SO FAR.

He ran out of sand table, erased his runes with two swipes of his tail, and wrote some more.

YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS PLAYED
>SOME ROLE IN THIS.
SOME DRAGONS THINK YOU'RE A HERO,
>OTHERS THINK YOU'RE A KIDNAPPER.
WE JUST WANT THE FACTS.

"Go ahead, son," Gunnarr said, trying to give his son confidence. "Just tell them the truth." Varinn stepped to within a few inches of the edge of the Nest, took a deep breath, and told the entire story, from his friends' entry into the cave to the scene at his house a few minutes ago. Astrid translated his story into grunts, growls, and other dragon noises. All the other dragons stood silently and listened.

When he was done, Nadder-blue-flies-in-the-storm stepped forward and gave a short monologue of her own.

SHE DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT CAVES.
>ALL SHE KNOWS IS,
HER SON VANISHED THREE DAYS AGO,
>AND WHEN YOU BROUGHT HIM BACK,
HE SEEMED TO LIKE YOU MORE THAN
>HER. SHE HAS A PROBLEM WITH THAT.<p>

Suddenly, a tan Gronckle roared, lifted off the ground, and rushed straight at Varinn, who screamed and clung to his father. Toothless leaped and head-butted the heavier dragon aside in mid-air. They landed and exchanged a few snarls before the Night Fury returned to his guard station in the Nest.

THAT ONE CALLED YOU A BABY-STEALER.

>TOOTHLESS TOLD HER TO WAIT UNTIL
ALL THE FACTS ARE IN.

>WE STILL DON'T KNOW WHO TO BELIEVE.<p>

"Well, why doesn't somebody ask the little dragon what happened?" Varinn blurted out. "_He'll_ tell you that I'm telling the truth!" _I hope,_ he added mentally.

Astrid-the-dragon translated. The blue Nadder let out a shrill series of squawks and sputters that sounded more like a burning ship sinking under water than anything else.

SHE'S ASKED HER SON. HE'S TOLD HER

>THREE DIFFERENT STORIES, AND SHE
DOESN'T KNOW WHICH ONE IS TRUE.

>WE DRAGONS HAVE WAYS OF KNOWING
THE TRUTH, BUT BABIES' MINDS AREN'T

>DEVELOPED ENOUGH FOR THAT.<p>

"Then why don't you ask him, uhh, Hiccup, sir?" Varinn exclaimed. He wasn't quite as intimidated by Hiccup, because he didn't think of him as a relative, even though they were related by marriage, sort of.

New-night-fury nodded and stepped forward. He called to the little Nadder, who promptly hid behind his mother. The Night Fury returned to the sand table.

I THINK HE'S AFRAID OF ME

Now Gunnarr stepped up. "Maybe there's a smaller dragon he'd be willing to talk to? You could listen to the conversation and get the facts that way."

Both Night Furies nodded vigorously at that. The Astrid-dragon let out a honking roar that echoed across the village. Everyone waited. Less than a minute later, two small black specks appeared from the direction of the forest, flying fast. They soon landed right in front of the Nest.

"It's the little Night Furies!" Fluffernut exclaimed from the window.

"It's Varinn's niece and nephew," Henny corrected her. "This is a heck of a time for a family reunion."

Meanwhile, Young-boy-night-fury and Young-girl-night-fury had gotten some quick instructions from their mother, and had struck up a conversation with the little blue Nadder. They were quite animated about it; Varinn would have smiled if he wasn't so worried about his own fate. All the other dragons were listening closely. The way they craned their necks to listen was almost human.

At last, one of the small Night Furies croaked something to his mother, who nodded. All three dragon children leaped into the air and flapped away toward the sea. Astrid-the-dragon began speaking to the adults; Hiccup-the-dragon resumed writing.

THE LITTLE ONE CONFIRMS YOUR STORY.

>YOU REALLY DID RESCUE HIM.
CONGRATULATIONS, YOU AND YOUR

>FRIENDS JUST BECAME HEROES TO US.<p>

A few of the dragons turned away silently, but the majority pressed closer to the Nest. The first to approach Varinn was a blue-green Zippleback, which extended a wing to him. Varinn wasn't sure how he was supposed to greet a dragon. A handshake? A head-butt? Maybe he should try to roar, and hope he didn't say "Go stick your head in a pig" in dragon language? He hesitantly reached out toward the dragon. The Zippleback brought its wing tip down sharply on his open palm; it stung a bit, but he got the idea it was a friendly gesture. When the next dragon offered him a wing tip, he willingly let it slap his hand. He had to change hands several times before all the dragons were done with him; the great creatures didn't know their own strength, and both his hands were red and stinging.

At last, the crowd of fire-breathing reptiles had left in search of other things to do. Only the Night Furies were left, and the mother Nadder. Hiccup joined Toothless, Guana, and the other dragons in doing dragon things; Astrid took his place at the sand table.

YOU DID WELL, VARINN.

>I WASN'T WORRIED.
NADDER-BLUE-FLIES-IN-THE-STORM
>WOULD LIKE TO SAY SOMETHING TO YOU.<p>

The blue mother Nadder hesitantly approached him and offered him a wingtip. He extended the hand that hurt the least, and braced himself, but the dragon didn't slap him. It stood there, waiting. After a few seconds, he slapped the wingtip himself. The Nadder withdrew her wing, satisfied, and began snarling and grunting at him.

SHE SAYS SHE'S SORRY FOR MIS-

>JUDGING YOU, BUT SHE WAS VERY
WORRIED ABOUT
NADDER-ONLY.

"Nadder-only? Is that his name?"

SHE LAID ONLY ONE EGG THIS YEAR.

>NADDER-ONLY IS HIS HATCHING NAME;
HE DOESN'T HAVE A REAL NAME
YET.

"Well... please tell her there's no hard feelings, and we did our best to take good care of her boy."

The Night Fury translated; the Nadder squawked some more.

BACK AT THE HOUSE, YOU CALLED

>HER SON A NAME. SHE WANTS TO
KNOW WHAT YOU CALLED HIM.

"Oh, that." Varinn blushed. The idea had seemed so clever when it came from his friends, but now that he was talking to adults, it sounded stupid. "My friends and I call him Scrubby, because... well, it took so much scrubbing to get him clean. He was really dirty when we found him. That's one reason we thought he was in trouble; we know how important it is for Nadders to stay clean and shiny."

Again, Astrid translated. This time, the Nadder went off on a monologue. It took her a while to finish.

I'LL SUMMARIZE THAT. SHE'S CALLING
>YOU A DRAGON-FRIEND. THAT'S A RARE
>COMPLIMENT. SHE SAYS
NADDER-BLUE-
>NEEDS-MUCH-SCRUBBING CAN PLAY
>WITH YOU IF YOU KEEP HIM
CLEAN.

Visions of soaking his boots and wearing out his hands on the beach filled his head. Would he have to put in that kind of effort every day? Would his friends help, or was this a treat that had been served on his plate alone?

"Son," came his father's voice from behind him, "I don't know much about dragons, but I know a peace offering when I see one. I think it would be good if you accepted her offer."

The Nadder came out with one more multi-toned squawk.

...AND IF YOU KEEP _HER_ CLEAN NOW
>AND THEN AS WELL.<p>

"Whoa!" Gunnar exclaimed. Varinn slapped his forehead. That dragon was huge! It would take him and his friends all day to get her as clean as they'd done with her baby. He looked her over, and he could already see a few spots that needed polishing.

"Doesn't her human friend keep her clean enough?"

SHE HAS NO HUMAN FRIEND.
>SHE MOVED TO BERK TO STAY
>WITH HER FRIENDS IN THE FLOCK.
>SHE NEVER TOOK A RIDER.<p>

He thought it over. "Okay," he decided. Speaking to the Nadder, he nodded and said, "You've got a deal. Thank you." The blue dragon looked hard at him, then bobbed her head up and down before she turned and left.

YOU JUST TAUGHT HER TO NOD "YES."
>THAT'S THE FIRST HUMAN GESTURE SHE'S
>LEARNED. YOU MIGHT BE THE
BRIDGE
>BETWEEN HUMANS AND DRAGONS
>THAT BERK HAS BEEN LOOKING FOR.

"A bridge between humans and dragons?!" Varinn burst out. "All I wanted to do was help a baby Nadder, not change my whole town!"

HICCUP JUST WANTED TO MAKE FRIENDS
>WITH A NIGHT FURY, AND LOOK HOW HE
>CHANGED THIS TOWN.
>YOUR DESTINY MIGHT BE BIGGER
>THAN YOU IMAGINED.

"She's right, son," his father chimed in. "Don't sell yourself short. You might play a bigger role in this crazy little village than anyone ever thought. Of course, your mother and I always knew you were meant for great things, but then, we're a little biased."

As they descended the stairs of the Nest, they were greeted by Hensteeth, Spamlout, and Fluffernut, who had rushed down to wait for him as soon as the dragon crowd had dissipated. "What happened?" they all asked at once.

"Well, we're not guilty of dragon-napping," Varinn began. "All the

dragons think we're wonderful, I've made a friend out of an enemy, Scrubby is going to join our gang, I've got an idea for our next adventure, and I haven't even had breakfast yet."

4. Chapter 4

**A Nadder's Mystery **Chapter 4

"So what's this idea that you had for our next adventure?" Spamlout wanted to know.

Varinn waited until he'd swallowed his mouthful of eggs before answering. "Can't it wait until I finish my breakfast? I've had a busy morning already."

"Oh, come on!" Henny mock-scolded. "We've all seen you talk and eat at the same time. You can't raise our curiosity like that, and then expect us to wait ten whole minutes!"

"Just watch me," Varinn grinned, and took another bite. It took closer to twenty minutes before he was done. He deliberately took his time eating, because his hands hurt from all those dragon wing-slaps, and because it was fun watching his friends fretting and trying to be patient.

"Okay, here's my idea," he finally said as he stacked his plate in the Mead Hall kitchen. "The dragons said that seven of their little ones have gone missing in the past month, and Scrubby is the only one who's come back. I'd like to look for those other six missing dragon babies."

"Why?" asked Spamlout. "Can't the dragons take care of their own problems?"

"Apparently not," Varinn shrugged as they left the Hall. "Dragons are big and powerful and awesome, but there are some things that people are better at. We have hands, we can go into places where they can't fit, and we think differently than they do. This will give us something interesting to do, it will be a challenge, and if we pull it off, we'll be real heroes! Could you live with that?"

They all considered the possibilities. Spamlout could certainly see the value in becoming a hero — maybe her father would finally say he was proud of her! Fluff, on the other hand, preferred to keep a low profile; being a hero might just draw more unwanted attention from the envious twins she had to share a house with. For Hensteeth, there were no huge pluses or minuses to being the center of attention, but it might be fun to be famous, just to see what it was like. The vote was three to one; they would search for baby dragons.

"So where do we start?" Henny asked.

"That cave is as good a place as any," Varinn suggested. "We found one baby dragon there; maybe there's more."

"Speaking of baby dragons, here comes one now," Fluff noted. A little blue Nadder was ambling toward them.

"Hey, it's Scrubby!" Henny exclaimed. "Welcome back, little guy!" They all crouched or got down on their knees to greet him. He stopped a few feet away, sniffed, and went back the way he came.

"What's up with him?" Varinn asked. He rose to follow the dragonet.

"That wasn't Scrubby," Fluffernut answered. "His wing markings are different. That was some other baby dragon."

"Since when were you an expert on dragons?" Spamlout demanded.

"I'm not," Fluff replied mildly, "but I spent enough time cleaning Scrubby's wings yesterday, I kind of got familiar with how they look."

Varinn turned back to the group, disappointed. "If we're going to be hanging around with a baby dragon, the first thing we'll have to do is learn to recognize him like Fluff does. Otherwise, we'll make off with the wrong Nadder by accident, and then we really will be dragon-nappers. Trust me, that's the last thing we

â€"

SQUAWK! They all jumped a foot in the air. Scrubby had sneaked up behind them while they were watching the other baby Nadder, and had scared the daylights out of them. They all glared at him. He bobbed his head up and down with his mouth open, letting out high-pitched chuckling sounds.

"Very funny," Spamlout pouted.

"He's got personality," Fluff said as she knelt and scratched his cheeks.

"His personality might be the death of us," Henny fussed.

"I'll take that as a reminder, if we needed one, that he isn't a dog or a pony who's tagging along with us," Varinn said decisively. "He's almost as intelligent as we are. We have to think of him as a different-looking kid who's joining our group."

"Do you think he'll mind if we call him a Terrible Terror?" Henny wondered.

"Good question," Fluff nodded. "Nadders are proud as well as vain." Scrubby wasn't acting very proud; he'd climbed into her lap and was rubbing his head under her chin, carefully keeping his head spikes flat against his neck so he didn't impale her with them.

"I've got a feeling we're going to spend the morning getting used to our new friend, and we won't make it to the cave until after lunch," Varinn observed.

"How hard could that be? He's just a small dragon," Spamlout scoffed.

"All we know about him is how hard he is to keep clean," Hensteeth countered. "We don't know how much he eats, or when his mealtime is, or how strong a flier he is, or how fast he can learn Norse words, or

â€"

"Norse words?" Fluff wondered. "What kinds of words should we teach him?"

"Just the basic stuff that will help him get along with us," Henny suggested. "We can't teach him to talk, but it will be better for everybody if he can understand words like 'no,' or 'come,' or 'stay,' or 'hey, not on the kitchen floor.' Simple concepts like that."

"Could we teach him to make fire on command?" Spamlout was suddenly interested.

"I'm sure he's smart enough for that," Varinn nodded, "and it might be useful, especially if we're going to be spending time in a dark cave. Just remember, we're not training a dog. He might teach us a few dragon ideas along the way."

"I'll do the teaching, if you don't mind," Spamlout retorted. "Hey, Scrubby, come here!" She gestured with her hand, and the little dragon left Fluff's lap and ambled cautiously over to her. "Can you make fire? Do you know what 'fire' means?" The dragon cocked his head and chirped; he didn't understand.

"He knew what you meant when you gestured for him to come," Henny realized. "Maybe hand signals will work better with him than words."

"Okay, then I need a hand signal for 'breathe fire'," Spamlout decided. She put her fist next to her cheek, then pushed it forward and spread out her fingers. "That means 'fire.' Can you do that, Scrubby?" She repeated the gesture.

The little dragon stared at her, then coughed twice and deposited a stomach-full of half-digested fish at her feet.

"EWWW!" Fluffernut was disgusted, Spamlout was disappointed, and the boys were trying hard not to laugh. "I guess that hand signal could be taken several ways," Varinn chuckled. "We'll have to learn to think like dragons if we're going to make this work."

"And how do dragons think?" Henny challenged him.

"A lot differently from us," Varinn replied. "Trust me; I've seen that in action. Maybe your brother can help us in that department, Henny. I think our first move should be to get this guy another breakfast, to replace the one he gave to Spamlout."

Varinn's estimate of how they'd spend their morning turned out to be distressingly accurate. The young Nadder found his second breakfast by flapping up to one of the feeding trays that used to serve Berk as beacons, to help the Vikings see attacking dragons in the dark. They were filled with fish for the dragons now, but most of those fish were too large for a baby dragon to swallow. He had to dig around to find enough small fish to fill his gullet, and when he landed afterward, he was coated from head to tail in fish slime. He landed, hung his head, and dragged his wingtips on the ground, looking utterly pathetic.

"It's scrubbin' time!" Henny sang, sounding a lot more cheerful about

it than he felt.

"Again?" Spamlout fussed. "Why can't he take one bath a week, like the rest of us?"

"Maybe I should make him a shirt and some pants," Fluff wondered. "They'd keep him clean, and if they get dirty, we can just change his clothes." Hensteeth laughed out loud at the mental picture of a dragon dressed like a Viking.

"I think that idea would push his mother further than she's prepared to go," Varinn thought out loud. "She's willing for her son to be with humans; I don't think she wants him to be like humans. We'll have to do this the hard way."

"Is there any good news?" Spamlout asked.

"Yes, there are four of us, so nobody has to do all the work," Varinn answered. "Hey, how about if we took him to the bath house? We can dip him up to his chin in water there; we can clean him up faster."

"Okay, should we take him to the men's bath house, so the girls can't help, or should we take him to the women's bath house, so the boys can't help?" Spamlout smirked.

"Shall I flip the coin?" Varinn asked, with a trace of a smile.

"No, you can help find a good place for all of us to wash him together, since it looks like we're going to be doing this a lot," Henny shot back. "Technically, Mama Dragon put him in your care; if he goes home dirty, it won't be my door she'll come knocking on."

"Or mine!" Spamlout chimed in.

"Okay, okay! Let me think." Varinn paced back and forth for a few seconds. "Okay, I've got it."

Down in the harbor was a row of dinghies drawn up on the shore. They were used when someone had to repair the docks and didn't want to get wet, or to unload passengers and cargo on the rare occasions when there were more ships in the harbor than docks for them to tie up to. One of those dinghies, pulled higher up on land and filled with water, became an impromptu bathtub, just the right size for a young Deadly Nadder. They used some soap this time, which made the cleaning go faster, and made sure to rinse him off thoroughly.

"If you ask me, he's enjoying this too much," Henny muttered.

"I think he's going to get dirty on purpose, just because he likes it when we wash him," Spamlout agreed.

"He's going to get excited whenever he sees a dinghy from now on," Fluff said quietly as she finished polishing his chest scales.

"Hey, it could be worse," Varinn shrugged. "I told you we have to wash the mother now and then, too, right?"

They glared at him.

"I told you that, right?" he repeated.

"We have to what?" Spamlout threatened.

"Well, maybe if you'd let me eat my breakfast in peace, I wouldn't have forgotten to what?" He never finished his sentence. As if on cue, the other three all began splashing him with water from the dinghy. Even Scrubby got into the act, sending the water flying with his wings. Varinn had to go home and change out of his soaking-wet clothing before he could even consider exploring their cave that afternoon.

5. Chapter 5

**A Nadder's Mystery **Chapter 5

Their cave exploration didn't get very far, because they had only half the day to work with. They found nothing of interest.

Varinn had noticed that Scrubby couldn't walk as fast as the humans could, while if he flew, he'd leave them far behind. He had the idea for all of them to wear leather backpacks, so the little dragon could ride on their shoulders without sinking his claws into anyone. Once he understood where they wanted him to ride, he took full advantage of their offer. He rode everyone's shoulders for a few minutes, but he kept going back to Fluffernut and Varinn.

"I'm amazed at how light he is," Fluff commented at one point. "I thought he'd be as heavy as a human toddler."

"He's a flying creature, so he'd have to be light," Henny had replied. "We don't know if their bones are hollow like birds' bones, or how they do it, but they're definitely light for their size."

"Be thankful," Spamlout added. "You wouldn't want to lug a human toddler around on your back all afternoon, would you?"

Once they left the cave, they sat on a flat rock to decide what they should do next.

"We don't actually know if there's anything in that cave that's worth looking for," Henny began. "Do we want to spend all our time and effort there?"

"Do you have any other ideas?" Spamlout asked.

"I guess we need to know more about the missing dragon babies," Varinn decided, and his shoulders slumped. "There's only one place where we can get those facts."

"You're really uncomfortable around your sister, aren't you?" Henny said sympathetically.

Varinn waved his hands in frustration. "She's my sister, but she isn't! If it was just the way she looks, that would be hard enough, but... she's changed so much! It's like she went away for a few months and turned into a grown-up! She's married with two kids, she's a chief over all the other dragons, she talks to me the way Mom does,

if you call that talking... I don't know how I'm supposed to treat her anymore!"

"Can't you treat her the same way you always used to?" Fluff asked.

"No, I can't!" he burst out. "I used to tease her about boys, or her hair, or getting zits, until she punched me in the arm. Now, I can't tease her about any of those things, and if she punched me now, she'd break my arm. She can't even talk to me!" He shook his head and stared at the ground. "I keep telling myself it's her in there, but everything I see and hear tells me I'm wrong." He forced himself to look up. "Still, if we want the facts about the missing dragon babies, I have to talk to her."

"I'll go with you, if you want," Fluff said quietly.

Varinn thought for a moment and nodded.

"I'd go, too, but my mother said she'd let me have it if I'm out past sunset," Hensteeth said. "I never know exactly what she means by that, and I don't want to find out." He got up and speed-walked towards his house.

"Are you coming with us?" Fluffernut asked Spamlout.

"Two's company, three's a crowd," she said as she rose to her feet. "I'll see you in the morning."

"What did she mean, 'Two's company, three's a crowd'?" Fluff asked after she was gone.

Varinn blushed. "I think she means... she thinks that we... I mean you and me... the two of us... uh..."

Fluff joined him in blushing. "Oh, for Thor's sake, can't two people be just friends without everybody trying to make a couple out of us? We're only twelve! That's young, even for Vikings!"

Varinn scratched Scrubby's cheeks; it was a convenient way to avoid looking at Fluffernut. "I guess that's the way Spamlout thinks. Her dad sees her as nothing but future marriage bait, and that's how she was raised, so she looks at everyone in terms of pairing them off."

"I suppose you're right," she nodded. "Shall we get going? If we wait much longer, we won't be able to see your sister in the dark."

"Yeah," he agreed as they stood. "Are you coming, too, Scrubs?" The dragonet chirped and walked beside them; they went slowly so he could keep up with them. It took them a while to reach the Nest. By the time they got there and understood Astrid's gestured invitation to join her on the second level, there was barely enough light to tell one Night Fury apart from another. The Hiccup-dragon lay on his rock mattress on the other side of the Nest, watching and listening but not getting involved.

"Maybe I should go get a torch, so we can see what your sister is writing for us," Fluff suggested.

Astrid-the-dragon gestured with her tail at a rack of torches on one of the corner posts. "I guess you guys thought of everything," Varinn commented as he took two torches. He looked around for something to light them with; there was no flint and steel handy. Then Fluff cleared her throat and pointed at the Night Fury. "Oh, yeah, I forgot about that," he muttered. He held one torch out at arm's length. Astrid lit it with a puff of dragon breath; he lit the second one from the first one, and stuck both of them in sconces on the corner posts near the sand table.

THE TORCHES ARE SOMETHING NEW.

>WE ASKED THE VIKINGS TO MAKE A FEW
CHANGES FOR US, ONCE WE GOT ORGANIZED.

>WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?<p>

"We'd like to know more about the missing dragon babies," he said. The Night Fury began writing quickly in the sand table; she had to erase and restart several times because she ran out of room.

THE YOUNG DRAGONS LOVE TO GO

>FLYING TOGETHER EVERY FEW NIGHTS.
THEY PRACTICE FLOCK-FLYING AND

>NAVIGATING IN THE DARK.<p>

IT'S COMMON FOR A GRONCKLE TO FALL

>ASLEEP AND SPLASH INTO THE SEA, OR A
NADDER TO LAND TO CHECK OUT A SHINY

>OBJECT, BUT THEY ALL GET HOME BEFORE
SUNRISE THE NEXT DAY.

BUT SEVEN TIMES LAST MONTH, ONE OF

>THE NADDERS DIDN'T COME HOME.
THAT'S NEVER HAPPENED BEFORE.

"So it's just the little Nadders who disappeared?" Fluff noted. "That might be important. Is there anything about baby Nadders that's different from other baby dragons?"

THE SAME DIFFERENCES AS ADULTS.

>THEY'RE QUICK, CURIOUS, SMART, AND VAIN.<p>

YOUR LITTLE FRIEND SAID HE GOT

>DISTRACTED BY THE FULL MOON, GOT
SEPARATED FROM THE FLOCK, AND HID

>IN THE CAVE IN THE MORNING BECAUSE
HE WAS SCARED. THEN HE GOT LOST.

THAT COULD HAPPEN ONCE, BUT NOT

>SEVEN TIMES IN A MONTH.
SOMETHING ELSE HAPPENED TO OUR
BABIES, AND IT MIGHT HAPPEN AGAIN.
THE DRAGONS ARE GETTING NERVOUS.

Varinn shuddered. He suddenly realized that when Astrid said "the dragons," she was including herself. She had two babies of her own. They weren't Nadders, but they were even smarter and more curious than their spike-tailed relatives. If little dragons kept disappearing, his quest for the missing dragonets might become a family matter.

"Why don't some of the adults fly with the little ones, to keep an eye on them?" he wondered.

WE'VE TRIED THAT. THERE ARE TOO MANY
>RAMBUNCTIOUS LITTLE ONES. WE CAN'T
>KEEP AN EYE ON ALL OF THEM AT ONCE.
>ONE BABY DISAPPEARED WHEN
>SIX ADULTS WERE PART OF THE FLOCK.

"Is there anything else you can tell us?" Fluff asked.

THAT'S ALL WE KNOW.

>ARE YOU TRYING TO FIND THEM?<p>

"We're trying to," Varinn said. "We haven't gotten very far." He waved at Scrubby, who was sitting nearby, flicking bits of dirt off his leg scales with his wingtips. "It's hard to solve mysteries when you have to spend half your day cleaning up a baby dragon!"

Astrid chuckled. It was a baritone laugh that didn't sound right to Varinn's ears at all.

NOW YOU KNOW HOW MOTHER DRAGONS FEEL.

>THANK YOU FOR ANY HELP YOU CAN GIVE.<p>

"You're welcome... Astrid," he said, forcing himself to say her name.

"Thank you for talking to us about this," Fluffernut added. They extinguished the torches by plunging them into the sand table, put them back in their rack, and made their way downstairs.

"We know a little more than we did before," Varinn noted.

"That isn't much," Fluff replied, "but every little detail might help us somehow." He walked her home before returning to his own house, where his mother was waiting for him at the door.

"I was starting to get worried about you," she told him.

"I was talking to Astrid," he answered.

"That's good," she nodded, and allowed him in. "You'll never get in any trouble that way. Your supper is on the table. It's pretty cold by now."

"Thanks, Mom," he said. He ate quickly and went to bed early; it had been a long, busy day.

He was awakened next morning by the roaring of dragons all over the town. It took him a while to track down one of the Night Furies who could tell him what was going on, but Hiccup-the-dragon finally took thirty seconds to write him a note in the dirt.

ANOTHER BABY NADDER DIDN'T
>COME HOME THIS MORNING<p>

6. Chapter 6

**A Nadder's Mystery **Chapter 6

"Okay, we all need to think," Varinn began. "What could be making

baby dragons disappear?" The Terrors were sitting in a circle on the ground near Varinn's back door. Scrubby had parked himself in the middle of the circle, and was strutting and preening; he seemed to think he was the focus of their attention.

"Could it be a predator?" Spamlout asked.

"Probably not," Henny answered. "Nothing would dare to mess with a flock of baby dragons, especially if there are some adults around. Besides, if it was a predator, how come it only gets the Nadders? That wouldn't make sense â€“ they're fast and hard to catch, and they'd be a very spiky mouthful."

"Yeah, I think we can cross predators off the list," Varinn nodded. "The dragons are still new to Berk; what if the babies are just getting lost because they don't know their way around here?"

"Same objection," Fluffernut countered. "Sometimes they have adults around, and the adults know their way. Besides, that still doesn't explain why just the Nadders are vanishing. There's something about Nadders that makes them vulnerable toâ€¢ whatever it is."

"It wouldn't be their positive traits, like having the hottest fire, or soaring long distances," Henny thought out loud. "It would be something that whatever-it-is could use against them, like their desire to be clean, or their curiosity."

"If we knew what was taking them away, it would be a lot easier to figure out which weakness it was taking advantage of," Varinn said.

"There's another possibility that we're avoiding," Fluff said quietly. "Maybe the problem isn't a 'what.' Maybe the problem is a 'who'."

"A person?" Henny burst out. "Who would want to pick on baby dragons? Everybody in Berk likes dragons, and the babies are the cutest of the lot."

"Everybody in Berk except one, you mean," Spamlout corrected him.

"Mildew?" Varinn and Henny both exclaimed.

"He hates dragons; everybody knows that," Spamlout went on.

"Is he mean enough to pick on babies, though?" Fluff asked.

"It might be worth finding out," Varinn decided. "The next time he comes into town to buy food, I think we ought to run up to his place and look around."

"I'm up for that," nodded Spamlout.

"He's creepy, and I bet his house is creepy, too," Fluff said. "I'm against it."

"We won't go into his house," Varinn explained. "That would be wrong, unless we had a really good reason, like we heard baby dragons inside. I think we should just look around; listen for the little

dragons; see if he's locked them up in a barn or something. I don't want to do anything that might get us in trouble."

"Trouble is bad," Henny nodded. "That old guy could really give us a hard time if he catches us on his land. I'll do it if it's understood we'll play it safe."

"That's understood," Varinn agreed. "Fluff, we've got three 'yes' votes, but I won't force you to go if you're really against it."

She twirled her ponytail for a few seconds. "I'll go. But trying to figure out when he comes to town could take days, and another little dragon might disappear by then. I say we go at night, tonight if we can. If the dragon babies are there, we'll hear them, so we won't have to get close to his house or anything."

"How will we get the babies to make noise?" Spamlout asked. "They might be asleep at night."

"One of us can make a dragon call," Henny suggested. "They'd answer if they thought another dragon was nearby, right?"

"Probably," agreed Varinn. "Who makes the best dragon call?" They each took turns. Fluff's Nadder call was realistic, but too quiet. Henny did a pretty good Zippleback call, but they weren't sure if the baby Nadders would answer a Zippleback. Spamlout's Monstrous Nightmare call was very good, but she could only do it at full volume, which would probably wake Mildew up. Varinn tried to do a Nadder call, but it wasn't very convincing.

Scrubby cocked his head at Varinn and squawked at him.

Varinn smacked himself in the head. "What a bunch of prize-winning idiots we are! We've got a perfect dragon caller, standing right in front of us! All we have to do is train him to squawk on command â€“ the Nadder babies will answer him for sure!"

"You think training him is easy?" Spamlout said acidly. "I tried it, and all he did was barf on my boots."

"We know he's not stupid," Varinn shot back. "We just have to find the right approach. We have to figure out how to think like a dragon."

Scrubby seemed bored by all this talk. He yawned, stretched, and curled up for a nap.

"That's one way of thinking like a dragon," Henny noted. "But it's not much help to us in this case."

"Dragons like to sleep," Varinn said absently, counting on his fingers. "Dragons like to fly. Dragons like to make fire. Dragons like to... eat! That's it! We can work with that. Let's go find one of those dragon-feeders and see if we can find some fish that are Scrubby's size."

At the mention of the word "fish," the little Nadder came fully awake and was staring intently at Varinn, licking his chops. The tip of his tail was twitching back and forth. The four young people had to laugh.

"Oh, so you already know that word, do you?" Varinn smiled. "We're going to teach you another word, as soon as we can find you a reward for learning."

As the group's best climber, it fell to Henny to shinny up the pole that supported the fish tray and climb onto the edge of it. He reached around and found a few small fish, which he dropped to the others. One of them fell far from anybody, and Scrubby leaped and snapped it out of the air.

"Oops," Henny called. "I missed that throw. Sorry."

"Actually, that's good," Varinn called back. "Now we know he's hungry, so he'll pay attention when we offer him food. I think we've got enough fish now, so come on down and let's try this."

It was surprisingly easy. They just took turns holding out a little fish just out of the dragonet's reach. If he tried to leap at it, they pulled it away. As soon as he squawked in frustration, the one with the fish would say, "Squawk!" and drop the fish. He got the idea after two tries; from then on, he squawked on command. They used up all their fish, which they called "Scrubby snacks," just to make sure he knew what they were asking of him.

Spamlout pouted. "Why didn't anybody think of this when I was training him to make fire?"

"We're all learning as we go," Varinn explained. "Nobody ever said training a dragon would be easy."

"It seems to me that he's training us," Fluff commented. "No simple commands or hand signals for him â€“ he's trained us to feed him when we want something from him!"

"He's no fool," Henny added.

Varinn shrugged. "Maybe he is training us, but it's okay, as long as we're all getting along, and as long as he learns what we're teaching him. Okay, I know we all have chores we need to do at our houses, so let's go do them. We'll meet at the forge after sunset, and we'll pay Mister Mildew's property a visit. If he's hiding little dragons up there..."

"What will we do?" Henny asked.

"We should tell the chief," Fluff suggested. "Mildew is an adult, and we're just kids. We shouldn't tangle with him."

"I think we should turn the little ones loose and lead them home with us, so we'll be heroes," Spamlout suggested.

"I think we should tell the other dragons where their babies are," Hensteeth suggested wolfishly. "They'll give Mildew justice!"

"They're angry enough to do just that," Varinn nodded, "and that would be a disaster. Even if Mildew deserves it, the moment a dragon attacks him or anything that belongs to him, it would mean the end of the peace between dragons and Vikings. Stoick would have to

take Mildew's side unless the evidence against him is totally crushing, and I'm not sure Mildew is that stupid."

"You're right," Fluff nodded. "So what will we do?"

"First, we'll find the baby dragons," Varinn decided. "Then we'll back off and talk about what we've found, and whether we should release them ourselves or get help."

"Talk?" Spamlout scoffed. "Saxons and Normans talk! Vikings take _action!_"

"Oh, perfect," Hensteeth replied sarcastically. "I can see it now! Four crazy kids charge onto an old man's farm in the middle of the night with weapons drawn, searching for something that turns out to not be there, and all they do is scare the old man's stupid pet sheep! Our parents would take our weapons away and put us on the fish-cleaning squad for a month, if we're _lucky!_ Varinn's right â€“ we have to get the facts first, and _then_ take action!"

"There's no Valhalla for cowards," she shot back.

Hensteeth laid his hand on his seax and almost drew on her, but Varinn stepped between them. "Who thinks we should scout Mildew's land first, and then decide what to do?" Three hands went up. "Sorry, Spamlout, that settles it. When it's time to take action, we will act. Until then, we will try to avoid acting like those mindless muscle-bound morons that you don't want to imitate. First, facts; then acts."

"Then, _axe!_" Spamlout shot back, miming a chopping motion.

"Sure," Varinn agreed. "Everybody bring your weapons tonight, just in case. But we are _not_ planning to use them! Okay?" They all nodded. "Okay. Let's get our chores done, and get ready for a big night."

They met quietly near the forge, which was always empty at this time of night. There was a time when the smith's apprentice would have been working late on some exotic project in his back room, but the smith's apprentice was now a Night Fury, and his project-making days were over. They checked each other's equipment; they all carried their usual weapons, and they wore empty backpacks to give Scrubby a place to ride. He promptly flapped up and perched on Fluffernut's shoulders.

They walked single-file up the path that led to where Mildew lived. The path was little-used, as one would expect from a path that led only to one man's farm, and an unpopular man at that. It was littered with fallen twigs and other debris that made it hard to walk quietly. The half moon through the clouds gave just enough light to let the Terrors see where they were going. It took them about half an hour to reach the outskirts of the farm. They could have made it in half that time if they weren't being so careful to avoid making noise.

"Okay, we should stay together," Varinn whispered. "We'll get next to every building, pen, and hole in the ground that might have baby dragons in it, and we'll get Scrubby to squawk." The Nadder squawked immediately, making them all jump. "Anyway, we'll visit Mildew's house last of all. I think we should start with that barn."

"If all we need is one person carrying Scrubby around, how come all four of us are doing this?" Spamlout asked.

"Because we're the Terrible Terrors and we do things together," Henny hissed. "Let's go." They tiptoed across the cabbage field toward the barn.

Scrubby's squawk drew no response there; nor did anything respond in the tool shed, the sheep pen, or (thankfully) the outhouse. When he squawked at the chicken coop, the hens inside set up a frantic clucking and fluttering, and Varinn was afraid the noise would wake Mildew. But nothing stirred inside the house. That house was now the only building they hadn't checked.

It was a typical Berk-style house, although it could have used some upkeep. There were no farming tools lying about, as one might expect of a working farm. The only things near the door were a large, heavy leather bag and a round, silvered glass about as big around as a man's palm. Scrubby glanced at the glass and was entranced. He suddenly flew down to the ground and stared at it, turning his head back and forth, admiring his own reflection in the moonlight.

"Scrubby, no!" Varinn hissed. "This is no time for typical Nadder behavior! We're on a mission!" Nothing he said made any impression. Scrubby had never seen himself so clearly, and this was an opportunity not to be missed.

It was Fluffernut who figured out the solution. She picked up the glass and held it next to Varinn's head. The Nadderling quickly took his perch on Varinn's backpack so he could still see himself, and that was exactly where the humans wanted him.

"Squawk!" she whispered. Scrubby responded with a loud croak that got an instant response from inside "the loud baa'ing of a sheep. "What's the matter, Fungus?" someone exclaimed sleepily.

"Run for it!" Varinn stage-whispered. "Fluff, leave the glass behind!" She pulled it away from Scrubby's view and rolled it back toward the house, crossing her fingers and hoping he didn't see it and jump off to view himself some more. It was her lucky night "the glass disc rolled with its dull side toward the baby Nadder, and he didn't recognize it as the source of delight he'd been gazing at. The four young people and the dragon double-timed it back to the path with no sign of having been seen. They paused to catch their breath.

"Did anybody hear any sounds that might have been baby dragons in the house?" Varinn asked urgently. They all shook their heads.

"Well, that was a wasted trip," Spamlout fussed.

"No, it wasn't. It means we can cross Mildew off our list of possible suspects," Henny replied.

"Which leaves us a list with exactly zero names on it," Spamlout added. "Admit it, Varinn. We're getting nowhere."

Varinn shook his head. "I'll admit it doesn't look very good. We'll

talk about this in the morning. Let's go home." They trudged home in silence.

7. Chapter 7

**A Nadder's Mystery **Chapter 7

When Varinn joined the other Terrors the next morning, they looked grim. "We've been talking," Henny began, "and we don't think this plan to rescue the baby dragons is working for us. We're taking dangerous chances and getting nowhere. You can try to talk us into trying again, but right now, the voting will be 3-1 against you."

"We have to face the facts, Varinn," Spamlout added. "Those little dragons might not even be around... anymore."

Varinn put his hands to his temples and shook his head. "I won't consider that until I have to," he said firmly. "You want to face the facts? Let's face them.

"One: something, or someone, is making baby Nadders disappear, one by one. That can't be an accident, which means it's happening on purpose, which means there's probably a person behind it.

"Two: whatever or whoever it is, the dragons are powerless against it. They can't do anything, and the people either don't know or don't care. That leaves us. If we quit, the babies will keep disappearing until they're all gone."

"Or until all the dragons leave because they think Berk isn't safe for their babies," Fluff added.

"That's right!" Varinn gasped. "That's exactly what Mildew would love to see happen -- the dragons leave Berk."

"Except we've proven that he doesn't have any baby dragons," Henny cut in.

"We've proven that there aren't any baby dragons on his farm," Varinn said firmly. "So what? He hates dragons, so if he's holding a bunch of babies, he wouldn't want them anywhere near him. What if he's holding them somewhere else?"

"Varinn, you're guessing!" Spamlout exclaimed. "If you want us to keep following you on this crazy quest, you need to give us more than guesses!"

"Okay," he nodded. "Let's get back to the facts. Three: we found two odd things on his farm, a heavy leather bag and the best mirror we've ever seen on Berk. That bag could have come from anywhere, but a mirror like that... we don't make stuff like that here. That's something he bought from Trader Johann."

"I agree with that," Hensteeth nodded, "but so what?"

"Well... the bag would be a perfect thing to carry off a tiny dragon in," Varinn began, feeling like he was about to lose his argument. "And the mirror... the mirror..."

Fluffernut leaped to her feet. "The mirror would be the perfect thing to attract a baby Nadder with! You all saw the effect it had on Scrubby! If that's Mildew's dragon bait, it explains why only the little Nadders are disappearing. All he'd have to do is wait at night until the flock of babies flies overhead, wiggle the mirror to reflect the moonlight, and watch his next victim land right next to him. Then he puts the mirror on the ground, and as soon as the baby dragon is completely distracted, voom! Down comes the leather bag!"

"Yes, Astrid did say it's common for a little Nadder to get distracted by a shiny object on the ground," Varinn added, suddenly filled with hope.

"Okay, what if you're right?" Spamlout challenged him. "What if he wiggles his mirror, and two Nadders land to check it out?"

Varinn had no trouble answering that one. "He knows he can't handle more than one dragonet at a time, so he hides the mirror, and the little dragons can't see it anymore. They keep flying, and he tries again on another night."

"A leather bag might hold a little dragon, but what if the dragon breathes fire?" was Spamlout's next question.

"For one thing, if they're scared, they may not think to make fire," Fluff answered. "For another, if you were trapped in a small space, would you light a fire and risk burning yourself, or choking yourself on smoke? I wouldn't." Varinn could have hugged Fluff for taking his side and applying her brains to his case, but that would feel weird.

"That's a lovely theory, and parts of it make a lot of sense," Henny nodded, "except for one thing. Where are the baby dragons?"

After a long pause, Varinn made his decision. "I don't know, but I'm going to keep looking for them, whether I'm outvoted or not."

Fluff was the first to find her voice. "Varinn, the Terrors do things by majority vote. We always have, and we always will. You can't just take off and do your own thing."

"But don't you understand?" Varinn was pleading with them. "This is more important than the Terrors! This is some mother dragon who's lost her baby and can't find him! This is seven mother dragons! How would our mothers feel if one of us disappeared?" He avoided Henny's gaze. "We are the only living things on Berk who care about those missing babies and can do something about them. If we quit, then more babies will vanish, until Mildew wins and the dragons leave us to live someplace safe. We won't see Scrubby again." He took a deep breath. "I won't see my sister again."

In the silence, Spamlout quietly said, "I thought you had mixed feelings about your sister."

"I do," Varinn said shakily, "but the idea of her leaving Berk... no. That's not going to happen if I have anything to say about it. I can't tell you how it tears my heart up every time I see her, or hear her... but I don't want to lose her. I will not lose her."

"I don't want to break up the gang. But I am going to find those dragon babies, or bring their killer to justice, whether you're with me or not." He folded his arms and stared at Scrubby, who was in the middle of their circle, watching them.

Fluffernut reached out and scratched under the little dragon's chin. He crooned and closed his eyes at her touch. "I'm with you," she said softly.

Henny looked at the tiny dragon, abandoning himself to her touch, completely trusting her. Was someone doing something similar, and then abusing that trust? "I'm with you."

They looked at Spamlout. "Fine," she snarled. "It might as well be unanimous. I'm in. So what do we do next?"

"We put our heads together and figure out some good places where the baby dragons might be." Varinn was back in charge. "We know they aren't on Mildew's farm, and we can be pretty sure they aren't anywhere in the village. That means they have to be somewhere unpopulated."

"Mildew is an old man; he can't walk as well as we can," Henny added. "It has to be a place he can get to easily, especially if he's carrying a struggling little dragon in a bag. That rules out most of the wild parts of Berk."

"It would have to be near an open space, so the little Nadders could see his mirror from a distance," Fluff thought out loud. "That rules out the middle of the forest."

"If you're right," Spamlout said, "then I know one place that would work: my cave. There's an easy trail that leads from the village down to the beach, and the beach is wide-open space."

"Could he climb that cliff inside, with a struggling little dragon in a bag on his shoulders?" Henny challenged her.

"He could climb it after he threw the bag down," Varinn answered. "Dragons are light; the fall wouldn't hurt them. He might not even care if the fall did hurt them."

"With all the branches and side caves, it could take us a long time to explore it all," Fluff commented.

"I'm willing to try," Varinn concluded. "Unless anyone else has a better idea, I think we ought to get weapons, torches, and backpacks full of exploring supplies, and get started. Scrubby hasn't gotten dirty yet, so we've got the whole day to look for our missing dragonets." No one had a better idea. In less than an hour, they were inside the cave and looking for clues.

"The floor is solid stone, so there won't be any footprints." Spamlout was stating the obvious, but it seemed worth saying. They came to the first fork. So far, they had always turned left, because the right fork looked like it got too narrow for comfort.

"Should we try turning right this time?" Henny asked.

"No," Varinn said. "That cave is still full of cobwebs. No adult humans have gone that way for months. We'll go left, as usual."

They came to the fork where they'd first heard Scrubby calling in the darkness. "Left or right?" Spamlout asked.

"I'm wondering about something," Varinn said instead of answering. "We've always assumed that Scrubby got lost in here because he was just wandering around in the dark. What if we're wrong? What if he came this way for a reason, like, he could hear baby dragons up ahead?"

"That's a pretty wild guess," Henny suggested.

"Every time we come to a fork, we have to guess at which way we should go, so we're taking wild guesses anyway," Fluffernut countered. "We know Scrubby isn't stupid. I'm willing to retrace our steps from our first time here, and see if he was onto something. If he wasn't, we can go back to guessing. If he was, we could save ourselves hours of searching."

"I guess that makes sense," Henny nodded.

"That means we go left, then down," Varinn said. "Onward!" They took the left fork, re-tied their rope where they'd tied it before, and climbed down to the lower level, one at a time. Scrubby chose to stay on Fluff's backpack.

Up ahead in the darkness, they heard something.

"What is that sound?" Varinn asked.

"I don't know," Henny answered nervously. "It sounds like something sliding across rock. I can't tell what it might be, except it probably isn't a baby dragon."

"Spamlout, slow down," Varinn ordered. "Group, stay close together." After a moment's thought, he added, "Get your weapons ready." Spamlout already had her axe in hand; Varinn shifted his heavy spear to his left hand so he could throw the light spear with his right; Hensteeth drew his seax; and Fluffernut nocked an arrow. Scrubby made a nervous-sounding squeal and hid his head in Fluff's backpack.

A few seconds later, they saw it.

"What... is it?" Fluff quavered.

"You said you wanted action, Spamlout?" Varinn said softly. "You're about to get some."

8. Chapter 8

A Nadder's Mystery Chapter 8

"You said you wanted action, Spamlout?" Varinn said softly. "You're about to get some."

"I take it back," Spamlout murmured, then jerked upright and brandished her axe. "No, I don't. Bring it!"

"Should we run?" Henny asked nervously.

"It might overtake us before we could climb out of here, and we'd be trapped against that cliff," Varinn decided. "We're better off standing and fighting it right here."

"It" was a tentacle, as thick as a strong man's arm, whitish in color and disgusting in appearance. It was sliding along the floor, its end probing back and forth like a huge pale worm. It extended back into the darkness; they couldn't see how far, or what it was attached to. The only thing they knew for sure was that it looked like very bad news.

"Fluff? Arrow." Varinn's words were quiet but firm. He was committing himself and his friends to battle against an unknown, scary-looking adversary, and they were willing to bet their lives that he was making the right decision. He heard Fluff take a deep breath. Her bowstring twanged, and a shaft embedded itself deeply into the tentacle. It writhed and withdrew a few feet, then slithered toward them again.

"My turn," Varinn said, and threw his thin spear with all his strength. It struck the tentacle and buried itself deep into their inhuman adversary. Again the thing writhed and pulled back, and again it closed in on them. That was when Henny gave them the really bad news.

"I think there's another one coming."

"Then we'd better dispatch this one while we can," he decided. "Throw your torches to the side to free up your hands and keep it from outflanking us! Don't let it grab you! Terrors, attack!"

That was their battle cry, which they'd never actually used in battle. They had played war games, pretending to face off against Viking raiders or renegade dragons, and they'd almost gotten used to using their battle cry casually. This was no game; this time, it was for real, and so was their enemy.

Spamlout was magnificent. Her weapon was perfect for the close-quarters fighting of a cave, and she used it fearlessly. The tentacle was soon oozing clear sticky liquid from multiple axe wounds, and was thrashing in pain more than seeking prey. Varinn and Hensteeth added their quota of damage, especially when the thing tried to wrap itself around Spamlout. Fluffernut stayed back; her weapon was useless in a melee. She fired several arrows at the second tentacle as it approached, but even though her marksmanship was perfect, all she could do was slow it down. It quickly took the first one's place in the battle.

"It fights like it can't see us!" Spamlout panted as she hacked away at the second tentacle.

"Be thankful for small favors!" Henny retorted as he stabbed the first one. "What's it going to take to make this thing quit?"

Suddenly Fluffernut prepared to launch another arrow. "Here comes a third one," she called out, "and this one looks really

ugly!"

Unfortunately, she was right. The third tentacle was thinner than the others, and it didn't have a blunt, round end. It terminated in a sharp, discolored, deadly-looking stinger.

"Game over, guys," Henny exclaimed. "I think we should have run."

"It's not over until it's over," Varinn shouted back. Fluff's bowstring sang again, but her arrows were too small to stop the thing.

At that moment, the second tentacle finally managed to wrap itself around Spamlout, lifting her off the ground and pinning her arms to her sides. She didn't panic and she didn't scream, but fought and kicked with all her might, which wasn't even close to enough. The tentacle pulled her back toward the stinger, which drew back as though bracing itself for a powerful lunge. He heard Fluffernut scream.

Then it lunged.

Then everything became too bright to see.

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When Varinn's eyes had adapted, a few seconds later, he saw Spamlout hacking desperately at a writhing, severed section of tentacle. A hideous green stain was slowly spreading across her tunic, but she seemed angry, not hurt. What was left of the three tentacles was withdrawing quickly down the cave. It looked like they had won somehow! How?

Then he saw his answer. It was Scrubby. The tiny dragon had dashed into the action at the critical moment, and sliced the ends off the stinger and another tentacle with a burst of his super-hot, super-bright fire. The stinger-less tentacle had completed its lunge and squirted its poison all over Spamlout, but it got no further than her clothing and did her no harm. The six-foot-long piece of tentacle that she was slicing and dicing was as good as dead, but the berserker rage was upon her and it would be useless to tell her to quit. He waited until she finally stopped on her own.

She was standing in the midst of pieces of tentacle, screaming and hacking at anything that twitched. Henny looked like he was in shock; he just stared at his seax and the disgusting clear-white liquid that dripped off of it. He himself was shaking, but it was fear mingled with excitement that they'd gone into battle against a hideous enemy and won.

Fluffernut was curled up in a tight ball on the floor, sobbing, "Make it go away! Make it go away!"

Varinn rested a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Fluff! It's gone! We made it go away!" She didn't respond.

To his great surprise, Spamlout pushed his hand aside. "Let a girl handle this, Varinn." She crouched beside the sobbing human wreck on the floor. "Get it together, Viking girl! We've got stuff to do, and

we can't leave you behind, and we can't carry you! Shake it off and get going!" No response there, either.

"Spamlout, I really don't think that approach is going to work." Varinn tried again with the hand on Fluff's shoulder. "Fluff, I know you just hit the limit of what you can handle. We all have limits; that doesn't make us weak. You've already endured stuff in your family that none of the rest of us could handle, and you just kept on going. You aren't weak; you're as strong as the rest of us on the inside.

"But we came a long way to find those baby dragons, and we can't do it without you. So dig deep and find just a little more strength to keep you going. Okay?"

"It's gone?" Fluffernut's voice was muffled.

"It's gone. We beat it â€“ all of us."

Slowly, the shaking girl uncurled herself. Varinn helped her stand. Spamlout shook her head and returned to her usual place in the front of the group. She turned to Scrubby and smiled. "That was pretty good, for a dragon who won't flame on command. We saved you, and now you saved us." The little dragon squawked at her.

From far down the hall, they heard multiple squawks in reply.

That got them all moving. They went carefully, weapons at the ready, watching the floor, walls and ceiling nervously for signs of any more tentacles, but their enemy remained out of sight. About a hundred feet from the battle zone, they found a side passage whose entrance had been almost completely blocked by a cave-in. Less than two feet of space separated the top of the rock pile from the roof of the cave. Scrubby acted very interested in that space.

"Scrubby, squawk!" Varinn ordered. He did so, and they heard several answers from inside the blocked-off part of the cave.

"It would take us hours to move all those rocks out of the way," Fluff observed.

"Henny, can you climb the rocks and wiggle through the hole?" Varinn asked. "We can pass you a torch once you're on the other side."

"Yeah, I can do that." Hensteeth wiped his seax on his pants leg and sheathed it. He climbed cautiously because he wasn't sure how stable the rock pile was, and he dislodged several stones as he worked his way through the opening on top. A minute later, they heard him call, "I'm on the floor. It's dark in here. Pass me a torch." Fluffernut was the lightest, so she timidly climbed part-way up the rocks and handed her torch through the opening.

"What do you see?" Varinn and Spamlout asked together.

"We found them!" Henny's voice replied. "All seven of them!"

Some of the little dragons eagerly half-climbed, half-flew out of their prison, once they could see the opening. Others could hardly move on their own, and Henny had to lift them through the opening,

where the others took them from him. None of the babies gave them any difficulty at all; they realized that they were being rescued and the humans meant them no harm. The problem came when they tried to get their little flock moving.

Three of the dragons were too sick, or starved, to walk. Varinn suggested putting them in their backpacks and carrying them, but the dragons all screeched, flapped, and pulled away as soon as Henny opened his pack.

"What's their problem?" Spamlout demanded.

"They're afraid of the pack because it reminds them of the leather bag they got captured in," Fluff realized.

"She's right," Varinn decided. "Okay, if they won't ride inside the packs, maybe they'll ride on top of them, like Scrubby does. Scrubby, shoulders! Show them how it's done." He patted Fluff's pack. Their dragon companion wasted no time in half-jumping, half-flying there. Once he was in his favorite vantage point, he gave the other little dragons a pep talk of some kind. When Varinn picked up one of the sick dragons and put it on Henny's shoulders, it didn't fight him. All three of the hurting dragons were soon on someone's backpack, and the four healthy ones walked alongside the Terrors as they slowly retraced their steps.

"Why did they stay in there when they could have easily gotten out?" Henny wondered.

"That's easy — they couldn't see the way out, and they were afraid of the tentacles," Spamlout answered. "If I was small like them, I'd be afraid, too."

They came to the near-vertical wall and their rope. "How are the four of us going to get eight little dragons up that wall?" Varinn asked.

"Take turns carrying them?" Fluff suggested. No one had any better ideas, so they did just that. They took Scrubby and the sick dragons up first, and those dragons waited at the top while the young people went down again and brought up the rest of the tiny Nadders. Then they put the hurting dragonets back on their shoulders and made their way out of the cave as quickly as they could.

The sight of four young people entering the town with eight baby Nadders would have been unusual under any circumstances, and these circumstances were far from usual. The first dragon to see them took wing and flew all over the town, roaring and bellowing at the top of its voice. That brought a rush of dragons, and a slightly smaller rush of Vikings who were wondering what the commotion was about. Varinn had hoped to march up to the Nest and announce their success to the whole town at once, but their little parade never got that far. As soon as a mother Nadder recognized her missing child, she would rush the group and quickly be reunited with her baby. The ones who couldn't walk still lifted their heads and called to their mothers. Those mothers exchanged some squawks and shrieks, then ran for the feeding trays. They filled their gullets with fish there, waited a minute, then offered their children a regurgitated meal while the little ones still rode the young people's backpacks. Those children began to perk up immediately, and couldn't wait to climb

down and join their mothers. The parade was down to the four Terrors and Scrubby by the time they finally reached the Nest. The Night Furies' home was completely surrounded by dragons and Vikings who wanted to know what was going on.

"Ladies, warriors, dragons, we've got a story to tell you," Varinn began.

9. Chapter 9

**A Nadder's Mystery **Chapter 9

If the dragons had been pleased when they learned about Scrubby's rescue, they could hardly contain themselves at the sight of the other seven missing dragon babies. Varinn mounted to the second floor of the Nest and told the story of their cave adventure, with occasional interjections from the other three, while Astrid interpreted it all into dragon language. Their huge audience responded to various parts of the story with roars that had to be dragon cheers, especially the part where Scrubby saved Spamlout's life. When he was done telling the tale, he had to go through the hand-slapping ritual again, along with all his friends. It still stung, but it didn't feel so bad. In fact, it felt kind of awesome, seeing all those great creatures lining up to greet him.

"Varinn!" Not many human voices could have made themselves heard over the din of the dragons, but Stoick was one of them. "I have a few questions for you, young man, if you don't mind."

"Are we in trouble, sir?" Varinn asked nervously. He'd never had any dealings with the chief of the village before. The chief didn't usually condescend to speak to twelve-year-olds.

"Far from it!" Stoick bellowed. "You've shown the dragons that people can really be their friends, and that's good for Berk and everyone in it. What I want to know is, who did this to the baby dragons?"

"We think we know, sir," Spamlout answered. They all took turns describing their visit to Mildew's farm, the mirror and the bag, and the baby dragons' reaction to their backpacks.

"That's not enough to prove anything," the chief thought out loud, "but at the very least, he needs to answer some questions. Mulch! Bucket! Bring Mildew here, whether he wants to come or not. And if you see that bag and that mirror, bring them as well." The two Vikings left on their errand.

"I have another question," the chief went on. "Those tentacles that you fought. What was that thing?"

"I think I can answer that, sir," Fishlegs interrupted from off to the side. "I've read about something like that in the notes that Bork the Bold wrote for the Book of Dragons. He called it a Monstrous Strangulator; it's a distant relative of dragons. If it's full-grown, it could be bigger than a Monstrous Nightmare." Stoick looked impressed.

The mob scene in front of the Nest went on and on. Some of the dragons wanted to talk to Varinn and his friends personally; Astrid

and Hiccup translated the roars and grunts into runes in their sand table. It was slow going, and it was still going when Bucket and Mulch returned to town, frog-marching an irritated Mildew between them.

"We didn't find the mirror," Mulch explained, "but we brought the bag. It has some baby dragon scales in it."

"Who could be that mean to a cute little baby dragon?" Bucket added sadly. "I hope I didn't do it."

"What is the meaning of this?" Mildew demanded of the chief. "Why have I been dragged out of my house like a common criminal?"

"I'm thinkin' yer right about the 'criminal' part," Gobber answered, poking the thin old man in the chest with his two-pronged arm attachment. "Seven counts o' kidnappin' isn't common, but I'm pretty sure it's a crime."

"Kidnapping is something people do to other people, not to dragons," the old man protested. "I haven't done anything to any person on this island, and I haven't broken any Viking laws! There's nothing you can judge me for, Stoick! Now unhand me and let me go about my business!"

Stoick looked thoughtful. "Technically, you're right, but..."

"Sir, he's completely right," Varinn called down from the Nest. "This isn't about people; it's a dragon matter. If he doesn't want you to judge him, then hand him over to the dragons and let them decide what he deserves."

When Astrid translated that, the dragons let out a roar, and it wasn't a friendly roar like the one they'd greeted Varinn and his friends with. They began pressing in on Mildew, who went even paler than usual and tried to hide behind the chief. "Protect me, Stoick!" he screamed. "Don't let those monsters get me!"

"It looks like you did something to make them mad at you," the chief commented. "If you want me to protect you from them, I need to know why they're angry. Start with a full confession."

After a moment, Mildew's face fell. "All right, I admit it! I was trapping the baby dragons and hiding them in the cave! The fear of the Strangulator kept them there. I learned that the tentacles never came hunting early in the morning, so I'd be safe in the cave at that time. If I could just get enough of the little beasts, the dragons would leave, and Berk would be a Viking village again!"

"Even if it meant killing innocent baby dragons?" Varinn demanded.

"I didn't kill anything!" Mildew shot back. "I gave them a few fish now and then so they wouldn't starve. If they left the cave and got caught by the Strangulator, that would be their fault, not mine. It was a perfect plan!" He angrily shook a bony finger at Varinn. "I would have gotten away with it, too, if it hadn't been for you meddling kids!_"

Stoick grabbed him by the back of his collar and lifted him off the

ground. "_You_ are in some serious trouble," he growled. "The dragons are our friends now."

"They're no friends of mine!" Mildew protested.

"I'm tempted to do what the young man suggested, and let the dragons deal with you," the chief went on. "But you're a Viking, and I have to treat you like one." He turned to his second-in-command.

"Spitelout! Tie up this person and stick him in a fish warehouse until I figure out what to do with him. Then form me a band of twelve good warriors. I don't like the idea of a monster lurking under our village." He grinned. "I feel like going Strangulator-hunting."

"A suggestion, sir?" It was Gunnarr Hofferson. "My son and his friends discovered the creature and struck the first blows against it. Shouldn't they get the glory of the kill?"

"Hmmm." Stiock stroked his ample beard. "You're right. They've earned the right to be in at the kill. Are you young people ready to join the hunt?"

Varinn's first thought was that, after all those dragon hand-slaps, he probably couldn't hold a soup spoon, never mind his spear set. He glanced at his friends; they looked pensive and uncertain, even Spamlout. "Sir, thank you, but I think we've fought all the Strangulators we can handle for one day."

"Are you speaking for your friends, or just for yourself?" Spitelout demanded suddenly.

"Terrors, who's in favor of letting the adults hunt the Strangulator?" Four hands went up. Spamlout was acutely aware that her father was watching her; her hand was the last to be raised.

"You've all got some lessons to learn about how Vikings never quit," Spitelout huffed. "Still, if your friends' story is true, Spamlout, then you did well." He turned and marched Mildew away to captivity.

"Did you hear that?" Spamlout exclaimed. "He said I did well! He said I did _well!_" She almost jumped up and down with joy. If there was a bit of moisture around the corners of her eyes, no one else mentioned it.

Now the dragon crowd was beginning to break up; the great reptiles wanted to see the rescued little ones and congratulate the mothers who'd gotten their babies back. That didn't mean that Varinn and his friends got a break. It just meant that when they came down from the Nest, they were surrounded by people instead of dragons now. Everyone wanted to shake their hands (which was agony after all those dragon hand-slaps) and congratulate them for solving the mystery, impressing the dragons, and winning their first real battle.

"I told you that you were destined for great things, son!" Gunnarr exclaimed as he gave his son a manly hug. "Your mother and I are so proud of you!"

"Thanks, Dad," Varinn said quietly. He couldn't help noticing that his three friends were being thanked profusely by the townspeople,

but aside from Snotlout shaking Spamlout's hand, he was the only one being greeted by his family.

"What are you going to do next, Varinn?" his little brother Rangi asked.

"We'll probably have to give Scrubby another bath," Varinn said ruefully. "Caves are dirty places, and I have a bad feeling our little friend brought some of that dirt home with him."

"Giving a baby dragon a bath sounds like fun," Rangi said thoughtfully.

"O-o-okay," Varinn replied. "I'll tell you what. If you really behave yourself, we'll let you help us wash him tomorrow." The other three Terrors tried to stifle a snicker at that.

The congratulations and adulation lasted all afternoon and well into suppertime. The four young heroes had a hard time eating their meals; they were constantly interrupted by people who wanted to express their appreciation, or ask questions about the fight with the Strangulator, or hold forth on how they'd never trusted that awful Mildew.

Fluffernut had it the worst, because her interruptions were deliberate and planned. Ruffnut and Tuffnut worked out a tag-team arrangement where one of them would pester her while the other took a few bites of supper; then they traded places. She was barely halfway done with her meal when the others were finished.

Varinn didn't leave immediately. From the door of the Hall, he could see the Nest. It looked like Astrid was dealing with some kind of disagreement between two young-adult Zipplebacks. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but after much roaring and hissing and grunting, the Night Fury got both heads of both dragons to look at something on the ground. Somehow, Varinn knew in advance what was about to happen.

The Night Fury cuffed one of the dragons' heads, hard. That head knocked into the head next to it, and so on, down the row of heads until all four of them had felt the blow. Astrid then proceeded to give them all a lecture, or a scolding, or something like that. The Zipplebacks left without making another sound.

How had he known she was going to do that, before she did it?

Then he understood. "That was such a typically Astrid thing to do," he whispered. His heart ached at the thought.

He started to turn away... and found Fluffernut leaning against the door frame, watching him, twirling her ponytail with a finger.

"Why don't you just go talk to her?" she said quietly. "Be honest. Tell her how you feel."

He thought about it for a few seconds, then nodded. They walked together from the Mead Hall to the Nest. They saw that Astrid-the-dragon was waiting for them.

10. Chapter 10

**A Nadder's Mystery **Chapter 10

Varinn had no idea what he was going to say when he met his dragon-sister this time. Fortunately, she took the initiative.

YOU'RE THE FIRST HUMAN THE DRAGONS
>HAVE WANTED TO TALK TO, ASIDE FROM
THEIR OWN RIDERS. YOU REALLY ARE A
>BRIDGE BETWEEN THE TWO SPECIES.<p>

"Uhh... okay. Is that a big deal?"

IT'S VITAL IF WE'RE ALL GOING TO GET ALONG,
>LONG-TERM. WHEN PROBLEMS ARISE, WE'LL
NEED SOMEONE WHOM BOTH SIDES TRUST.
>YOU'RE WELL ON THE WAY TO BECOMING
THAT SOMEONE.

Varinn glanced back at Fluffernut, who was staying in the background. Just her presence gave him some comfort, and the strength to disagree with this huge black dragon.

"I'm only twelve, remember? I don't know if I'm ready for a big, scary destiny like that."

AT LEAST YOU GET TO CHOOSE YOUR DESTINY.
>MANY PEOPLE DON'T GET THAT CHOICE.<p>

She lowered her head to look Varinn in the eye. What lay behind that reptilian gaze? What was she thinking? A few minutes ago, her actions had been so achingly familiar, but now, up close, she seemed like a creature from some other world. Varinn couldn't meet that gaze for very long; he turned away.

VARINN, TALK TO ME. WHAT'S WRONG?

"I want my sister back!" he blurted out. After all his recent heroics, not to mention his Viking upbringing, crying was the last thing he wanted to do, but he couldn't stop himself.

Astrid let out a sad croon and nudged him with her nose. He pulled away sharply. "No! I don't want to hear your dragon noises! I want to hear you tell me to go sit on a Nadder spike! I want to hear you call Rangi a little troll!" He buried his face in Fluff's shoulder and sobbed, "I want you to punch me in the arm and say, '_That's_ for being such an idiot!' just once more! Oh, may the gods smite you and everything that looks like you! I want my sister back!"

The two girls let him cry until he began to regain his composure. Then he felt a nudge on his arm. Astrid had gently batted him with her paw.

THAT'S FOR BEING AN AWESOME BROTHER

He stared at the runes in the sand table, then at Fluff. Her eyes looked a bit moist as well.

"Varinn, some of us don't get any part of our loved ones back. At

least you've got the parts that matter the most. Doesn't that count for something?"

He dried his eyes and took a deep breath. He forced himself to look back into those huge green eyes that regarded him so seriously.

She was a dragon. She was black and scaly, and had wings and a tail. She had a dragon-husband and had laid eggs that hatched into two dragon-children. She breathed fire, and spoke a language that he could never understand.

Somewhere inside her was a girl named Astrid, who had grown up with him and tormented him and protected him and taught him a few things about family, and courage, and life.

How could anyone resolve such a contradiction? He was only twelve! He wanted to run. He wanted to scream. He wanted to punch someone. He settled for flinging his arms around her thick black neck and crying some more. Fluff made eye contact with Astrid over his shoulder, nodded, and quietly left.

Varinn and Astrid stayed up for half the night together. Edda went out looking for her son, saw him on the second floor of the Nest, and returned home satisfied; she knew he was probably safer there than anywhere else on Berk. When Hiccup returned from his night flight, he found other things to do in other parts of the village.

The next morning, while Varinn helped his mother clean up after breakfast, he said, "Mom, can I ask a favor? Mr. and Mrs. Thorston are taking a two-week trip to visit her relatives on another island, starting tomorrow. That means the twins can do anything they want to Fluffernut, with no adults around to hold them back."

"I've noticed that they don't treat their cousin very well," Edda nodded. "What are you asking of me?"

"I'd like to know if Fluff could come and live with us for those two weeks, and sleep in Astrid's room."

"You've answered your own question, Varinn. That's Astrid's room."

He took a long, deep breath. "Mom, Astrid isn't going to sleep in that room, ever again. We both know that. I don't like admitting it any more than you do, but... that's how it is. I asked Astrid about it last night, and she doesn't mind."

Varinn wasn't the only one who had a hard time dealing with Astrid's changes. Edda still struggled with denial. But she was the mother around here. Who did her son think he was, to tell her how to relate to her own daughter?

Astrid would never sleep in that room again. It was the first time anyone had had the courage to say that to her face.

She'd always known it was true, but when she considered it herself, she felt like she was betraying her daughter somehow. Hearing it from someone else, even her own twelve-year-old son, made her feel like less of a traitor to her own family.

"What, exactly, are you intending, son?"

"I just want to do something nice for Fluff. She's nice to everybody else, but she never gets a break."

It was true that Fluffernut was nice to everybody. Edda had a sudden thought — exactly how "nice" had this girl been to him? How "nice" did he hope she would be?

"Is there something going on between the two of you that I should know about, Varinn? Are you more than just friends?"

He smiled, a bit self-consciously. "Yes, Mom. She's kind of like a sister to me."

Edda was doubtful. "If you think she can take Astrid's place, you're very much mistaken."

"I know that, Mom. One of the things I figured out last night was that there are many different kinds of sisters in this world, and a lot of them don't wear spiked skirts. But they're all awesome."

Edda thought about that, then thought about it some more, and finally nodded. "I'll speak to your father about it. Be forewarned — I'm going to watch you two like a hawk, just to make sure nothing goes on between you!"

Varinn's smile was genuine. "Thanks, Mom! I'll go tell —" He was interrupted by a scratching at the door. His smile faded. "Oh, boy. That's Scrubby at the door, and I'll bet I know what he wants!" He opened the door. His face fell even further.

"That's not Scrubby," Edda observed.

"No, that's his mother," Varinn moaned, "and I think she wants her turn to get cleaned up! Now you know what I'll be doing for the rest of the day."

"I suppose you're going to round up your fellow Terrible Terrors to help you?" she asked sympathetically.

"No, Mom. I made that deal with Nadder-blue-flies-in-the-storm all by myself. They can volunteer to help if they want to, but this is my responsibility. Can I borrow some clean rags to help polish her up?" Edda gave him a few of her dishcloths.

"Thanks, Mom. We'll be down by the beach if you need me for anything." He faced the big blue dragon. "Okay, let's go. You're awfully big, and there's only one of me, so the sooner we get started, the sooner you'll be clean and shiny." He had no idea how much she understood, if anything, but she walked next to him without any argument. Scrubby and several other baby dragons tagged along, curious.

Edda watched them go, and wondered at the changes that life kept throwing at her. First, her daughter turned into a dragon. Now, her son was turning into a man.

THE END

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**A/N **_The story behind the story:_

In case anyone didn't notice, this is a Viking adaptation of "Scooby-Doo," with two young men and two young women solving mysteries together, with the help of an animal whose name sounds like "Scooby." I toyed with the idea of using the canon cast, a few years before the movie, but that would mean six characters when the Scooby theme called for four. My four aren't copies of the Scooby teens; they're meant to be interesting characters in their own right, without being based on anybody. If you've read my other stories, you've already met Varinn Hofferson; he's appeared, briefly, in several of them.

This is the first story I've written with the intent of writing sequels. The trouble is, I'm not so good at thinking up mysteries. If any of you can think of a worthy plot line that tickles my fancy, I'll consider it, and give you credit if I use your idea.

End
file.